Chapter One

‘What's wrong?’ the boy asked him, ‘are you alright?’
Haru swallowed the lump in his throat, gritting his teeth as he stared at the boy who stood before him. The boy looked to be about seventeen or eighteen, the same age as Haru.
He stared back at Haru, waiting expectantly, calmly standing there with his hands in his pockets.
‘Well?’ the boy asked in a playful manner. ‘What's wrong, cat got your tongue?’
Haru gave a small gasp, eyes widening slightly.
A memory flashed in his mind then of his mother, many years ago when he was very young.
He remembered the words she had spoken to him when Haru was afraid, or when times were difficult for him, she would help him.
It just takes one act of bravery, a single breath, a heartbeat……just say the words……
Haru drew himself up, forcing the words from his mouth.
‘I'm all alone here’ he began awkwardly. ‘I’ve just transferred here, my.... f-father wanted me to go to this school.’
Haru waited for a moment, but the boy just stared back at him, blinking. After a few seconds passed, it was clear that he was waiting for Haru to continue.
‘Um…I….’ Haru’s heart beat harder in his chest, and he fought back his nervous tears. ‘I don’t…know anyone in this school…I was wondering if you could…would…’
The boy continued to stare mutely, his expression passive, if not a little curious.
‘I was wondering if you wanted... to be my friend…I mean…if that’s ok’ Haru finished, trailing off. ‘I get lonely...’
A second past, and Haru’s nerves failed him.
‘I'm sorry’ he whispered, turning to run away.
‘Hey!’
Haru was jerked back suddenly as the boy grabbed his sleeve. Haru glanced around tearfully, seeing that the boy was smiling.
‘I would love to be your friend’ he said.
‘Hu?’
‘What is your name?’
Haru blinked back at him.
The boy let go of his sleeve, and Haru turned back to face him.
‘Do you mean it?’ Haru mumbled.
‘Well sure.’ He paused. ‘Why are you crying?’
‘I get so nervous’ Haru said wiping at his eyes. ‘I'm sorry…’
‘There’s no need to be sorry’ he replied jovially. ‘My name is Aubrey, what's your name?’
Haru groaned to himself.
‘Well?’ Aubrey asked with a teasing smile, tilting his head at him. ‘What is it?’
‘Um…it’s…Haru.’
‘You're awfully nervous, aren’t you?’ Aubrey smiled.
‘I don’t mean to be…’
‘Oh no don’t cry’ Aubrey hastened.

‘I’m not crying, I've just…got something in my eye…’
‘Sure.’
Haru glanced up, watching a pair of girls walk past them in the hallway, caught up in their conversation they didn’t seem to notice anything else. But Haru waited until they were gone before speaking again.
‘This is all so new to me’ Haru said to Aubrey glumly. ‘I get scared.’
‘What's there to be scared of?’ Aubrey asked him casually.
Haru groaned again, looking away towards the ground. ‘I get picked on a lot’ Haru said shyly. ‘I'm weak, I get sick a lot, and I'm shy and awkward around people.’
‘Awww?’
Haru gasped then, feeling a little panicked.
‘Oh no! Please don’t feel bad for me!’
‘You're like a little puppy that’s been left out in the rain’ Aubrey gleamed.
Haru hesitated, blushing slightly.
‘Are... are you making fun of me?’
‘Oh, not at all’ Aubrey said sounding surprised.
Haru buried his face in his hands.
‘I have to go’ he mumbled, before turning and running away.
‘Hey wait, hold on a second!’ Aubrey called after him.
But Haru was already gone.

Aubrey returned to his friends shortly after that, walking at a leisurely pace down the corridor as he headed to class. It was supposed to be a revision class, but most people who went there just messed around.
‘Aubrey! Finally, you jerk! Where the hell were you?’
‘Sasha, keep your voice down’ Aubrey tutted at his friend.
‘How do you expect to pass these exams if you keep missing these revision classes?’ Sasha glowered.
‘Get off my back’ Aubrey snapped, ‘I missed one class.’
Beside Sasha, their friend Amelia began to giggle at their antics.
‘You guys are always so funny’ she smiled.
‘So where were you?’ Ben asked, approaching them, they talked outside the classroom now.
‘You wanna borrow my notes Aubrey?’
Aubrey stared transfixed at the papers Ben held in his hand, but it was clear that his mind was not focused on the notes.
‘What's wrong?’ Ben asked.
Aubrey closed his mouth, hesitating.
‘I…I talked to someone.’
‘Could you be any more vague?’ Sasha asked gloomily, rolling her eyes.
‘There was this kid…’ Aubrey mumbled, turning away and ignoring Sasha’s comment, ‘…he looked so sad….’

It was about ten minutes or so later, and Haru was still crying. Hidden just outside the building where he had been speaking to Aubrey, he was concealed by bushes now, out of sight of anyone just passing by. He was leaning back against a tree, hugging his books to him and sobbing quietly.
He gasped then, hearing movement to his side.
'Hey I found you' Aubrey smiled down at him, 'at last. I should have known you'd be crying' he added quietly as an afterthought.
'N-no I wasn't I…!'
'I really wasn't making fun of you' Aubrey told him seriously, moving around the bush and coming to stand before him.
'Hu?'
'Come with me' Aubrey offered, holding out his hand, 'I want to introduce you to my friends.'
Haru hesitated, clutching at his chest as if his heart pained him.
'You say that you were lonely and scared' Aubrey said, 'I'll introduce you to my friends, then they will be *your* friends too, then you won't have to be lonely anymore, or scared. I promise most of them are not scary.'
'But…' Haru breathed, still teary eyed, 'what if they…don't like me…?'
'If they are mean to you then I will fight them' Aubrey gleamed happily.
Haru stared up at Aubrey, he couldn't help but smile a little.
'That's a funny thing to say.'
'Are you going to take my hand or what?' Aubrey asked, still holding it out, 'come on, it's getting tired.'
'Sorry…' Haru mumbled, reaching out towards him.
Aubrey grasped his hand tightly, pulling Haru to his feet.
'There, that's better' Aubrey said with a smile, 'and don't look so frightened…I'm not going to do anything bad.'
'I'm sorry' Haru murmured, quickly looking away.
He let go of Aubrey's hand.
'You really are timid, aren't you?' Aubrey sighed wearily.
'I just…lack confidence…' Haru mumbled, head bowing lower. 'I…don't have any self-esteem…'
He flinched suddenly as Aubrey touched him beneath the chin, lifting his head gently.
'Look people in the eye when you talk to them' he said.
Haru blinked, the edges of his lips tweaked in a smile.
'Or else people will sense your weakness and go in for the kill' Aubrey finished happily.
Haru's smile faltered.
'Come on' Aubrey smirked, letting go of him and moving away, sticking his hands in his pockets calmly and casually as he walked away. 'I want to show off my find.'

'Hey look I found a stray!'

They were back in the revision class, everyone around them was busy at work. Ben, Sasha and Amelia all stared silently up at Haru from their seats as he stood there nervously beside Aubrey.
Sasha drew a deep breath, opening her mouth to speak.
'You shut up' Aubrey butted in before she had a chance to use her voice.
'I think he's really cute' Amelia beamed, as beside her Sasha gasped indignantly, glaring up at Aubrey.
Haru blushed furiously, balling his fists nervously at Amelia's comment.
'His name is Haru' Aubrey continued. 'His dad's an astronaut and he's spent the last eight months with his dad in space trying to build a facility so that the human race can populate the moon because earth is getting too crowded.'
'Really?' Amelia gasped in awe.
'No, you idiot' Aubrey answered flatly.
Amelia began to protest loudly, and Aubrey began to argue defensively back at her.
'So, you're a transfer?' Sasha spoke to Haru asking him a very normal question.
'Um…yes' Haru replied awkwardly, hugging his books to his chest.
'What's wrong?' Sasha asked, 'are you shy?'
'Um…yeah…a little…sorry.' Haru hunched his shoulders, feeling his cheeks were hot.
'There's no need to be sorry' Sasha grinned at him, ignoring Aubrey and Amelia who continued to argue beside them. 'I bet you don't have any friends hu?'
'Don't be rude Sasha' Ben snapped suddenly. 'Sorry' he shrugged apologetically to Haru, 'I know how hard it is changing schools. My dad is in the army and we move house a lot. It's tough I know.'
'You've…changed schools like that?' Haru mumbled.
Ben smiled warmly at him. 'We can be friends if you like.'
'Thank you' Haru flushed. 'I um…'
He groaned, bowing his head.
'Uh-oh' Aubrey gasped, turning away from Amelia then and clapping his hand over Haru's eyes. 'It's ok' Aubrey laughed awkwardly. 'If you don't see the tears it means he's not crying.'
'What are you doing?' Sasha protested. 'Get off him you jerk! He's not crying!'
She pulled Aubrey's arm away sharply then, gasping and drawing back as she saw that Haru really was crying.
'I'm sorry…' Haru whispered, brushing his tears away. 'I…'
Aubrey's arm shot out then, grabbing Haru by the sleeve.
'Don't run away again' Aubrey ordered, and Haru stared back at him wide eyed. 'If you run away…' Aubrey hissed dramatically, 'if you give into fear……...then the terrorist win.'
'Jerk!' Sasha snapped, leaping up and smacking him over the head with her book as Amelia moved over to Haru to comfort him, shielding him from the mayhem as Sasha began to verbally assault Aubrey.
'Girls…' Aubrey uttered in exaggerated pain when all of it was over, 'are so violent these days….'
They settled down quickly, having drawn attention from the rest of the revision class for their mayhem.

‘I know it looks like we’re all crazy’ Ben waved at Haru, smiling awkwardly, ‘but we’re actually really nice.’
‘I know it’s hard’ Amelia was saying to him. ‘Ben was really shy when he first came here.’
‘He was?’ Haru asked tentatively.
‘Yeah’ Ben replied sheepishly, scratching the back of his head.
‘He’s really come out of his shell’ Amelia said to Haru. ‘Ben and I have been friends the longest. I was going through a hard time and…Ben didn’t know anyone back then…we sort of connected…you know?’
‘Um…yeah…’ Haru laughed awkwardly at her, smiling then. ‘Thank you, you’re very kind.’
‘Why don’t you sit with us?’ Amelia suggested. ‘Do you want a drink from the vending machines or something? I’ll get you something. What would you like?’
‘Oh no I couldn’t’ Haru began to protest.
‘Don’t be silly’ Amelia giggled, smacking his shoulder lightly. ‘I want to get you something. Don’t upset me. That’s what friends do for each other, they help each other, now…’
Amelia pulled back a chair, dragged Haru over to it and forced him down into the seat.
‘What would you like from the vending machine?’
Haru blinked up at Amelia in wide-eyed confusion.
‘Um…’ he struggled to find his voice, ‘just…juice…orange…. please…’
‘Great!’ Amelia cried happily. ‘Back in a jiffy!’
Ben leant on the table, resting his chin on his palm as he watched Amelia go.
‘You can relax you know’ he said to Haru. ‘You’re so tense.’
‘Sorry’ Haru mumbled.
‘And stop apologising for everything.’
‘Sor…’ Haru stopped himself.
Ben smiled at him happily. ‘It will get easier, trust me. You’ve got us now. Will you two shut up?!’ he snapped at Sasha and Aubrey who had been arguing. ‘I can barely hear myself think!’
Haru hunched his shoulders then, giggling into his hand.
‘What's so funny?’ Aubrey grumbled at him, the front of his shirt balled up in Sasha’s fists as she held him there.
‘It’s nothing…you guys are just…so weird…’
‘Well at least you're smiling now’ Aubrey said, prising Sasha’s hands off his shirt. ‘It means you're beginning to relax.’

Amelia returned a short time later with a carton of orange juice, handing it to Haru who took it from her tentatively.
‘Thank you very much’ Haru mumbled shyly.
‘It’s ok’ Amelia waved merrily at him. ‘If you ever want a favour, don’t hesitate to ask, that’s what friends do for each other, right?’
‘R-right’ Haru answered quickly, clutching the carton to his chest.
Amelia immediately struck up a conversation with Sasha, as Ben and Aubrey began to speak together.
Haru bowed his head smiling then, feeling a little more at ease.
‘What do you think Haru?’

‘Hu?’ he tensed slightly, glancing back wide-eyed at Aubrey.
‘Jeez you're not spacing out, are you? Stay with the program will ya?’
‘Oh yes’ Haru fumbled, smiling awkwardly. ‘I will.’
‘You don’t know what I was talking about do you?’ Aubrey said to him, giving him a tired expression.
‘I’m sorry’ Haru laughed nervously, ‘could you repeat that again please?’

It was a few hours later when the small group left the revision class. Sasha, Amelia and Ben went on their own way, and Aubrey stayed with Haru.
‘So, are you alright then?’ Aubrey asked Haru out of the blue.
‘Why…I mean…sure I'm fine…?’
‘I just want to make sure you're ok’ Aubrey tilted his head, regarding Haru closely. ‘I want to make sure the others aren’t too much for you…you're like a frightened little mouse you know?’
‘I'm not a mouse’ Haru scowled at him sullenly.
‘It’s alright’ Aubrey replied with a smirk, strolling past him, ‘I'm just teasing. So what class are you in?’
‘Class C’ Haru replied.
‘I'm in D’ Aubrey said, ‘it kinda suck, all my friends are in different classes. The only time I really get to see them is in break and during our club-time, or revision class.’
‘Club time?’
‘Yeah, we all have a drama club together. Are *you* in any clubs?’
‘No’ Haru bowed his head glumly.
‘You should stop around some time and see what we’re up to’ Aubrey smirked. ‘It’s a lot of fun.’
‘It is?’
‘We should both probably be getting back to our dorms now, you know what the teachers get like if they catch us wandering around too late…what room are you in?’
‘Um…thirty-three…’
‘And who do you share a room with?’
‘I don’t know right now’ Haru answered, ‘he’s home due to a family situation…or so I heard…’
‘Aww. That’s too bad’ Aubrey said turning and heading the other direction. ‘Gotta go now. See ya!’
Haru watched him saunter away, walking with confidence. Haru felt a twinge of jealously and resentment at that.
‘Sure…’ he mumbled after him, speaking now to the air, ‘…see you…’

Chapter Two

The next day after the morning classes were finished, Haru sat upon a stone wall on the edge of the grounds. It was a raised platform built in a circle, the flower bed behind him was filled with colour, and a small tree hung over him, its branches drooping.
He sat alone in silence, staring down at his carton of juice.
In the distance he could hear other people with their friends, laughing as they enjoyed each other's company. There was another group nearby playing with a Frisbee, throwing it back and forth. They all sounded very happy.
Haru let out a sigh, bowing his head further. He squeezed the carton of juice lightly, fiddling absent mindedly with the little white straw at the top.
He heard movement then, seeing something out of the corner of his eye.
He turned, giving a start at the sight of the figure, hooded and cloaked all in black, the figure sidled up beside him.
'Haru...' the figure spoke in a foreboding and dramatic voice, face hidden completely by the low hood. 'Meet me in the drama hall in five minutes.'
Haru stared back at the figure in shock, eyes wide and mouth open.
'…. Aubrey?'
'Don't be late' Aubrey said rising to his feet and gliding dramatically backwards, slipping around a corner and out of sight.
Haru stared after him a little confused, wondering what that was all about. He looked ahead again, straightening up and quickly finishing his carton before putting the rubbish in his bag. He made his way across the grounds, heading to the drama hall, following Aubrey's path.

'Hey you made it!' Aubrey called out happily as Haru let the doors swing gently shut behind him.
Aubrey stood there wearing the same cloak but now with the hood lowered, and he watched as Haru stood there at a distance looking nervous.
'Come child' Aubrey spoke, reaching a hand out to him, 'there is nothing to be afraid of young one…you are safe with me.'
'W-what's going on?' Haru mumbled, stepping closer, seeing the others in the hall, Amelia and Sasha and Ben, they were carrying stuff around and unpacking boxes of costumes.
'We're holding a little play' Aubrey told him spiritedly, clutching at his own chest, balling the dark fabric up in his hands. 'I'm naked underneath you know.'
'What?'
'Just kidding!' Aubrey gleamed, smacking Haru playfully on the shoulder a little too hard.
Haru straightened up, rubbing his shoulder and frowning nervously as Aubrey walked away from him, talking to the others.

‘Will you hurry up?! Is this going to take all day?’
‘Be quiet!’ Sasha instantly snapped back at him. ‘I don’t see you helping!’
‘I'm carrying this cloak’ Aubrey answered curtly, indicating the cloak he was wearing, and saying so as if he were doing a wonderful thing.
‘Oh, hey Haru, it’s good to see you’ Sasha said ignoring Aubrey now.
She put the box she was carrying down.
‘Aubrey was talking so long I thought he’d never find you’ Sasha said.
‘Why...’ Haru asked nervously, ‘why do you want to find me?’
‘We want to show you our play’ Sasha grinned excitedly.
‘We’re putting on a play’ Amelia said to him, sitting upon a seat a short distance away, beginning to unpack the box before her.
‘And it’s going to be so much fun’ Ben added, sifting through his own box he had carried out from the store room. ‘We did something like this last year and it was a real blast.’ He straightened up, putting his hands on his hips. ‘Have you been in a play before?’ he asked Haru.
‘Oh’ Haru replied, ‘um…no…I haven’t.’
‘Maybe you should try it’ Ben suggested. ‘It’s really fun once you get into it. Though at first it’s a little nerve wracking.’
Haru blushed slightly as he stared back at Ben, a short distance away Aubrey still wearing his cloak, glanced back at them.
‘I.....’ Haru began, ‘I’ve never been in a play before…. I’m too nervous…I get awkward around people I don’t know.... and I get awkward in new situations.’
Ben fell silent then as the others continued with what they were doing, rummaging through boxes unpacking props, continuing to listen to their discussion.
‘Why don’t you join us in the play?’ Ben offered suddenly.
‘Hey that’s a great idea!’ Sasha cried out suddenly. ‘Why don’t you do that?’
‘Oh no’ Haru fumbled. ‘I’m no good at that sort of thing.’
‘It would help you make friends’ Aubrey spoke up, ‘and build your confidence. I think it would be good for you.’
Haru stared back at Aubrey, for a moment lost for words.
‘Come on’ Aubrey prompted. ‘We would love to have you on our team, it’ll be fun. We’re still working on the play so we can fit you in easy.’
Haru pursed his lips, blushing slightly, he swallowed the lump in his throat.
‘Ok’ he breathed.
‘Great’ Aubrey clapped his hand together. ‘Oh, we’re going to have so much fun!’
Haru blinked nervously back at Aubrey, before glancing away towards the others. He was surprised to see them smiling.
‘Are....’ Haru began, ‘are you sure I won’t cause any trouble for you?’
‘Don’t be silly’ Sasha waved at him laughing. ‘We could do with an extra member, you’re helping us out, and in turn we can help you out. This could really help you come out of your shell.’
‘Oh’ Haru hunched his shoulders. ‘You’re making me feel like there’s something wrong with me’ he mumbled. ‘I don’t mean to be so shy…I wish I was more confident…’
‘Oh no don’t take it the wrong way’ Amelia said quickly. ‘We’re only trying to help.’

‘I know’ Haru smiled, a little more relaxed now. ‘I know I need to change…and I want to…’
Aubrey smirked at him. ‘Well come on’ he said clapping his hands loudly all of a sudden. ‘Let’s get this show on the road!’
‘What’s going on?’ Haru asked Sasha as the others moved over towards the stage at the back of the hall.
‘Practices’ Sasha smiled. ‘We’ve only just decided to start a play recently, and we’re doing all this in our spare time so it can be a little tricky to get together to work. But we managed it last year so we’ll manage it this year too.’ She grinned. ‘We’re still deciding what play to do.’
The lights shut off suddenly, and Haru jumped, glancing around nervously.
‘It’s ok’ Sasha said to him, taking a seat in a chair that faced the stage, ‘sit down.’
Haru did so, sitting in the empty seat beside Sasha. On her other side was Ben, he glanced with a smile towards Haru, before looking ahead again, towards the stage.
Haru realised suddenly that Aubrey and Amelia were missing, and he glanced about for them, but couldn’t see them.
The heavy black curtains of the stage drew slowly apart then, and Haru blinked as he watched, seeing, Aubrey standing there, still wearing his black cloak. The spotlight from above focused on him when the rest of the stage was in darkness.
Aubrey took a step to the side, and the spotlight followed him. Haru realised then that Amelia must be controlling the levers, hidden somewhere backstage.
Haru’s attention drifted back to Aubrey who stood now centre stage with the spotlight on him. Aubrey bowed his head, hands clutched at his chest.
In one dramatic move he threw the cloak off suddenly, revealing the glittering purple trousers and long sleeve top he wore.
Haru’s eyes widened, and he drew a slow gasp.
Upon the stage Aubrey gestured, a dramatic pose, sweeping his black hair back. He turned towards the audience, arms pressed over his heart now, he began to speak loudly and clearly, his voice resonating around the empty hall.
‘All I wanted was to be loved…to be *accepted*.’ Aubrey bowed his head then, shoulders hunched, his body began to tremble. He raised his head suddenly, teeth gritted, tears in his eyes. ‘You were the only one who ever cared for me, and you left me, abandoning me to suffer my trials alone!’
Haru glanced nervously to the side of him, seeing Sasha smiling at him and holding something in her hand. They were eye drops, tears in a little bottle.
‘It’s ok’ Sasha smiled, speaking in a whisper as she noticed Haru watching her. ‘He knows what he’s doing, he’s done this before…’
Haru smiled awkwardly back at her, feeling a little embarrassed for panicking slightly, for thinking that Aubrey was actually crying.
He raised his head, watching Aubrey as he continued to act.
‘When you were gone…’ Aubrey continued, ‘…I felt as if I could not go on any longer…I felt as if my heart had been ripped from my chest…as if I had already died…though I kept on breathing and moving.’
He paused then, for several seconds Aubrey did nothing. And then he grasped his chest again, drawing a shuddering breath.

‘Not a day goes by when I don’t miss you…. why did you have to leave me…? Your loss…your absence…. has left a permanent scar on my heart…. mother…’
Haru gasped then, his eyes wide with shock.
‘It just takes one act of bravery’ Aubrey recited, ‘a single breath, a heartbeat……just one small *push*.’
He moved his hands forward then, as if to push an invisible object before him.
‘And then….’ Aubrey breathed, ‘you are free……...’

Aubrey lowered his hands, smiling down at those before him as Sasha and Ben began to clap, Amelia stepping out onto the stage from behind the scenes, clapped also as she approached Aubrey.
‘That was wonderful’ Amelia told him, ‘you recite very well.’
But Aubrey was not listening, he was staring at Haru in shock.
‘…...Haru…?’
Haru who had been fighting back tears, biting the flesh of his hand so hard it hurt, could no longer control himself.
He hunched forwards, bawling into his hands, to the alarm of Sasha and Ben beside him.
‘Haru!’
Aubrey leapt off the stage, rushing up to him.
‘Haru! What’s wrong?’
Haru raised his head then, looking Aubrey in the face.
And then, through all his tears, he smiled.

‘I’m sorry’ Haru spoke a short time later, once he had calmed down. ‘I don’t know what came over me.’
Aubrey glanced at him tentatively, the two were sitting side by side now backstage. Sasha, Amelia and Ben had left the hall to go back to classes, and Aubrey and Haru were alone. The others had been reluctant to leave Haru, but Aubrey had insisted, not wanting them to get in trouble for missing class. As for himself, he didn’t care.
‘I must have really surprised you’ Haru said awkwardly, raising his hand to his head.
‘Yeah’ Aubrey replied uncertainly, ‘a little.’
Haru lowered his hand, staring ahead now, though not looking at anything in particular.
‘I was just so overcome’ Haru began, ‘I…couldn’t stop myself.’
‘Was it something I said?’ Aubrey asked tentatively, ‘if it was then I’m sorry.’
‘No, it was nothing like that’ Haru waved away. ‘It wasn’t something you said….’ And then he broke off. ‘Ok it was’ he relented, staring at his lap.
He smiled weakly, eyes glazing over.
‘You recite beautifully’ Haru spoke in a distant voice. ‘You are…an incredible…ah….’ He scratched his palms nervously then. ‘I’m no good at all this.’

‘It’s ok’ Aubrey encouraged. ‘Tell me what’s on your mind.’
Haru grimaced then, a little tense. He hunched his shoulders, frowning.
‘You….’ He forced himself to speak. ‘You reminded me of my mother…’
Aubrey blinked in surprise at this. But he did not interrupt Haru, as he continued to speak.
‘My mother used to recite words from a play to me…when I was very young. I was just a boy.’ Haru swallowed the lump in his throat, breathing slowly and deeply, calming his beating heart. ‘I was always a weak person’ Haru spoke with regret, ‘my mother helped me a lot growing up, but I never really fit in anywhere.’
‘I guess you haven’t changed much’ Aubrey said.
Haru felt a stab in his heart then, but when he looked at Aubrey, he saw that he was smiling.
‘It’s ok’ Aubrey said, ‘I was making a joke.’
He grabbed Haru by the shoulder, shaking him roughly.
‘You need to learn to lighten up.’
‘Oh.... s-sorry.’
‘And you need to learn to stop apologising for everything.’
‘So-’ Haru broke off then, stopping himself.
He smiled suddenly, and Aubrey smiled with him. Haru was beginning to relax.
‘Thank you’ Haru said to him, ‘for being kind to me…for letting me be your friend.’
‘No problem.’
Haru’s eyes fluttered towards Aubrey then, keeping his head low and shoulders hunched.
‘Ah’ he said, turning his head away. ‘I’m so jealous of you.’
‘Of me?’ Aubrey said. ‘But why?’
‘It’s not just you’ Haru said, ‘it’s everyone. I just…. hate myself sometimes. I have always been so weak… I get sick a lot… because of that I missed a lot of days of school when I was young. I stayed at home a lot, but my mother was always there to look after me when I got sick, she was always good to me, she did everything for me, she was always there no matter what, even when she was sick herself.’
Aubrey watched him silently.
‘My mother’ Haru continued, ‘she used to speak words to me when I was scared. I was afraid of school because I didn’t know how to fit in. Everyone had their own group of friends, and I was always an outsider… because I spent so long out of school when I was sick… but my mother was always there to help me.’ He smiled. ‘She used to say something to me when I was afraid…she used to say, *‘it just takes one act of bravery, a single breath, a heartbeat……’*
‘The words I said’ Aubrey realised, ‘the words from…. a play…’
‘Courage of the Black Nightingale’ Haru whispered. ‘A story about love and loss… broken hearts… and learning to trust again.’
‘It’s one of my favourite plays’ Aubrey mumbled.
Haru held his hands together before him, scratching at his nail.
‘When I was scared, my mother used to say to me, that it took just one push, one act of bravery. I was able to overcome many obstacles because of her… but then...’
Haru bit his lip, as hard as he could to stop himself from crying again.
‘Did your mother….’ Aubrey asked, ‘did she…?’

‘I mustn’t cry’ Haru whispered to himself, ‘I mustn’t…I have to be strong…. That’s what she wanted….’
Aubrey grasped his shoulder firmly then, as Haru turned to face him, gasping, frozen now, his breath caught in his throat.
‘Your lip is bleeding’ Aubrey said.
Haru fumbled, hand going to his mouth automatically.
‘Stay here’ Aubrey told him firmly.
He left his side, returning seconds later with a box of tissues.
‘Here’ he said, lifting the tissue to Haru’s lips, dabbing the blood away
‘Thank you’ Haru murmured.
‘You say you were able to become strong again because of your mother’ Aubrey said to him. ‘I want to help you like she did, you have friends now.’ He smiled warmly at Haru, drawing his hand back. ‘We will help you’ he told him, ‘that’s what friends do…’

‘I’m sorry everyone’ Haru said to the others when they had returned to the hall after classes had finished. ‘I didn’t mean to worry you all.’
‘If Aubrey said anything to upset you’ Sasha told Haru, ‘just tell me and I’ll beat him to a bloody pulp.’
‘Don’t do that’ Amelia fumbled, ‘that’s too violent.’
‘It’s ok’ Haru waved at them, showing both his hands in a submissive gesture. ‘Aubrey helped me, a feel a lot better now.’
‘Ha! You see that Sasha? I did a good thing’ Aubrey said smugly.
‘Why were you upset?’ Ben asked Haru uncertainly.
‘Aubrey didn’t do anything wrong’ Haru told them, ‘it’s just…’ he took a deep and steady breath, blinking slowly. ‘Aubrey was just reciting the same lines from the play my mother used to tell me about’ Haru explained. ‘I loved that story…even thought it had its painful moments….it was a beautiful story…and it still is.’
The others watched him with interest, listening silently. Haru had finished speaking, and a moment’s silence passed.
‘Why don’t we do that play?’ Sasha suggested, speaking quietly.
‘Not if it’s too painful for you’ Ben added quickly.
‘It’s ok’ Haru smiled, ‘I don’t mind. Only if you guys are ok with it though. I don’t want to cause any trouble for anyone.’
‘Don’t be silly!’ Aubrey said loudly beside him, leaning on his shoulder, causing Haru to stumble. ‘That’s what friends do!’
Haru turned to face Aubrey then, blushing slightly as he stared transfixed at him.
‘You don’t need to be sad’ Aubrey told him, ‘you don’t need to be afraid, because you have us.’
Haru felt his stomach tighten, his heart began to skip in his chest.

‘Well you have us anyway’ Sasha finished flatly. ‘Amelia, Ben and I. If you have any problems just come to us ok?’
‘Hey that’s not fair’ Aubrey protested loudly. ‘I was the one who made him feel better!’
‘You’re just a jerk-face’ Sasha said to him glowering.
‘And you’re just a whiny little-’
She smacked Aubrey over the head before he could finish his sentence, causing Amelia to cry out loudly in shock as Aubrey began to dramatically howl in agony as Ben tried to break the two apart.
Haru began to laugh then, clutching at his sides. The others all stopped what they were doing, turning to him with confused expressions.
‘I’m sorry’ Haru gasped as he doubled over, crying tears of laughter. ‘You guys are just so funny!’
They watched him for a moment, blinking uncertainly as he continued to laugh. And then Aubrey grinned.
‘See Sasha’ he said to her, causing her to instantly shoot him a dark glare, ‘…I’m doing a good thing….’

The next day they met up in the drama hall again, and when lunch was over, Aubrey insisted on walking with Haru to his next class.
‘I told you, you don’t have to escort me’ Haru laughed.
‘But I want to’ Aubrey gleamed.
‘Won’t you be late to your own class?’
‘Probably’ Aubrey replied, ‘but I have to keep up my reputation as a delinquent.’
Haru turned away with a frown of amusement. ‘You’re not making any sense.’
Aubrey just smiled silently in return.
‘Well here it is’ Haru said slowing to a stop a short while later.
‘Great!’ Aubrey gleamed, spinning on the spot and strolling away. ‘See ya!’
Haru watched him go, letting out a sigh.
‘Strange boy’ Haru mumbled to himself, before turning and heading into class.
Haru attended his classes for the rest of that day, breathing a sigh of relief when it was over.
He filed slowly out of his last class with the others, trailing after the others into the corridor.
He slowed to a stop, glancing up in surprise to see Aubrey waiting for him.
‘Hey’ Aubrey waved.
‘What are you doing here?’
‘I came to walk you back to your dormitory.’
Haru hesitated, giving an uncertain and nervous laugh.
‘I don’t need someone to walk me back.’
‘You mean you don’t want me around?’
‘No no’ Haru fumbled. ‘I didn’t mean anything like that… it’s just…’ he let out a sigh then, smiling warmly to Aubrey. ‘You remind me of a puppy’ he finished.
Aubrey stared back at him in surprise, his expression frozen for a moment, before he adopted a comical expression of exaggerated sadness.

Haru began to laugh into his hand.
‘You’re so strange’ he said to Aubrey.
‘Come on’ Aubrey said stepping back. ‘I want to see which room you’re staying.’
‘Oh, is that the real reason you want to walk with me?’
‘No?’ Aubrey replied innocently.
They walked side by side through the school, heading out of the building across the grounds and towards the dormitory blocks, where the students slept. The dormitories were split into two sides, one side for the girls, and the other for the boys. There were several small dormitory buildings.
As they made their way closer towards the dormitories, Haru’s attention drifted away, looking towards the edge of the grounds, where there was steel fencing, grey bars that ran around the entire school and its grounds. Too high to easily climb, the bars too narrow to fit through. They trapped the students here, they were like bars of a prison.
‘Are you alright?’ Aubrey asked.
‘Yeah’ Haru spoke hastily, turning back to him. ‘I’m fine.’
‘You don’t like it here do you? Aubrey spoke quickly.
Haru groaned then, dipping his head to the ground.
‘Is it that obvious?’ he mumbled.
Aubrey looked away again, towards the dormitories. ‘Come on’ he said, ‘let’s keep going.’

They parted ways after that, but not before Aubrey had walked Haru all the way to his door.
Aubrey glanced up, looking at the number above the door, remembering it.
‘I’ll see you around then kid’ Aubrey smirked turning away.
He left without another word or backwards glance, walking with his hands in his pockets, whistling a tune.
Haru watched him go nervously, feeling butterflies in his stomach. He gritted his teeth, forcing himself to look away, and opened the door to his dormitory.
Each room was shared by two people, with two beds on opposite sides and matching furniture as well, all of which was identical, two of everything.
Haru put his bag down, moving over to one side of the room to sit on the bed.
He was alone here, his roommate was away, taking some time off due to family reasons, or so he had been told, and it was lonely here. Haru wished to meet his roommate, just for the company, and at the same time was nervous for it. He knew he would meet his roommate soon, the matron who monitored the dormitories and kept an eye out for bad behaviour as well as organising the students that stayed here, had told Haru so.
He looked towards the window then, seeing the grounds beyond, seeing the steel fencing, beyond which was a small area of woodland, beyond that the town.
He felt so trapped here, it was only a short time he had been at this place, and like almost everyone who stayed here, he did not come here by his own choice.
This was a boarding school, and their rules were strict. Most people were sent here by their parents for one reason or another, and they stayed here for months without being allowed to leave. They were not even allowed to see their friends outside the school, or their families,

not without special circumstances. Not that that mattered much to Haru. He had not made any friends outside this place, and his family….
He rose to a stand, leaning forwards on the windowsill and staring outside.
'Still…' he mumbled to himself, 'it's not all that bad here…'

Chapter Three

Haru woke the next morning, rising early and quickly getting dressed.
He exited his room, expecting to see Aubrey outside waiting for him, but was disappointed to see that he was not there.
Haru glanced one way down the corridor, then the other, but he did not see him.
Around him the other students were one by one leaving their rooms, walking away to head to their first classes.
Hoisting his bag up his shoulder, Haru made his way forwards with the others, leaving the building and heading outside.
Haru attended his first class. The boarding school Haru attended had several classes, there were the standard English, Maths and Science, and there were also other classes like History, Languages, IT (computers), Geography. Haru struggled in these subjects and didn't enjoy any of them. Worst of all was P.E. He enjoyed sports, but enjoyed it at his leisure. In school, he found it difficult and challenging. He didn't know anyone in his class, and people mostly ignored him. He had tried to speak to some of them and make friends, but people had already formed their groups and they weren't interested in him. Aubrey was the only one who had accepted him.
Aubrey… Haru thought to himself. *I really miss you…I miss all of you…Amelia and Sasha and Ben….* He hung his head, staring at the books before him as he worked silently. *I really look forward to seeing their show…I wonder what they're doing now….?*
Haru became quickly lost in thought. He didn't enjoy his lessons in school, and though he had only seen a glimpse of the play Aubrey and his friends were about to perform, he was excited.
I've never been in a play before Haru thought to himself. *It's going to be fun…and a little scary.*
Much of the time, Haru's mind was far away from his studies. He performed at best only average in class and was awkward around people. But he had a creative mind. He struggled most in Maths and Science, but in other fields, he excelled.
Haru had a deep love of music, and art. He did not get an opportunity to indulge in such things while he was here, and that was part of the reason he felt sad, and at times a little lost.
He had only been at the school for a short time, and already he was beginning to stand out for all the wrong reasons. He was shy, introverted, and people began to notice. It wasn't long before certain people began to stare at him, deliberately trying to intimidate him and make him feel uncomfortable. While most ignored him, others began to tease him.

Oh no, they're here as well? Haru thought glumly to himself as a couple of the boys a short distance away continued to stare at him. *I guess they're everywhere.* Haru bowed his head, keeping his attention fixed on his work.
The rest of that day went by as usual, and Haru kept an eye out for Aubrey and his friends, but he did not see them. He sat alone at lunchtime simply watching the scene around him, then when classes were over, he went straight to his dormitory, glancing about him as he went in case Aubrey was around, but he wasn't.
Haru went to his dormitory, closing the door after him and turning to face the small room. It was empty, his roommate had still not arrived.
Haru put his bag down on the floor beside his bed, moving over towards the window and leaning forwards on the sill, staring.
The grounds were beautiful, with the setting sun off in the distance casting is orange glow upon the land, everything was lit with a gold lining.
Haru let out a sigh, tilting his head as he smiled.
Despite his difficulties, his fears and the constant feeling of anxiety he felt when he was here, he felt a strange sensation of joy.
He blinked slowly, staring with eyes out of focus at all that was before him, through the window to the big wide world beyond.
'What a beautiful world we live in….'

Several days passed in which he did not see Aubrey or any of the others, and things began to get difficult for him.
On the way to one of his lessons, one of the boys waved to him, but his smile was not a friendly one.
'Hey rich kid!'
'Hu?' Haru baulked.
'Yeah I'm talking to you' the boy said as he walked past him with his friends.
They all smirked at him as they went on, turning away and sniggering amongst themselves.
Haru watched them cautiously with wide eyes as they went away.
He swallowed the lump in his throat, hands going to his chest as he began to clutch at his heart.
He bowed his head, gritting his teeth, forcing himself to stay calm as anxiety threatened to overwhelm him.
Keep calm keep calm.
He often followed this mantra on his worse days.
As he straightened up again, arms dropping to his sides, his left hand twitched, and he felt a great need suddenly within him.
He let out a breath, turning his head to the side and pushing the thought away.
He begun to feel lost again.
Haru raised his head, straightening his body and staring down the corridor.

It was later that day during PE, that he was playing a game of rounders with his class.
He hated it. He remembered when he was younger playing rounders with his mother and some of the gardeners in his home. It had always been a lot of fun, and they had all smiled and laughed together, sitting down to rest afterwards to have drinks together. It was enjoyable, relaxing.
This is not like that Haru thought miserably to himself, standing at the edge of the game as a fielder. For a long time, he had stood there doing nothing. At first, he had tried to keep attention to the game, but after a while of nothing happening, his attention began to drift.
He stood there lacklustre, his mind in another place entirely, somewhere it was more beautiful.
As he stared at the ground a short distance away, his eyes began to water and a tear trickled down his cheek.
He bowed his head, wiping his eyes slowly with the back of his hand and gritting his teeth, angry at himself.
'Dammit…' he hissed.
'HARU WAKE UP!'
Haru glanced up suddenly, seeing the ball shoot over his head.
'Get the dam ball!' one of the boys hollered.
Haru began to panic, turning and running in the direction of the ball.
He reached it too late, grabbing it and throwing it back to one of the boys on his team. He stood there uncertainly as several began to complain loudly at him, not knowing what he had done wrong.
'Haru what are you doing?!'
'I…I-I'm sorry!' Haru called nervously back.
One of them began to berate him, but he couldn't hear what the boy was saying.
Haru's chest began to feel tight, and he clutched at his heart, beginning to breath rapidly.
He was suddenly unware of anything going on around him as he bowed his head again, blocking out the rest of the world from his mind.
He began to tremble as his breathing became more pained, his gasps deeper as he began to hyperventilate. His vision clouded over, and he sunk to his knees, body hunched.
'He's having a panic attack!' someone called, as the teacher ran over to him.
The teacher knelt beside him, hand on his shoulder and speaking calmly into Haru's ear, telling him to control his breathing, his words spoken firmly but gently.
But Haru did not hear him, that was when the teacher put Haru's arm over his shoulders, lifting him to his feet and walking away supporting him.

Haru was taken to see the nurse, where he was eventually able to calm down.
He sat in the quiet room with the nurse before him. She was kind, and through her kind words, Haru was able to control himself.
'Do you feel better now?' she asked him softly after a time.
Haru glanced up at her, his eyes red. The box of tissues sat on his lap, several tissues clutched in his hand.

‘I’m sorry’ he whispered, not trusting his voice to speak, ‘I hate being so weak all the time.’
‘It’s ok’ she told him. ‘I understand.’
‘My heart hurts’ she told him.
‘You get heart palpitations?’
He raised his head, eyes teary as he watched her.
‘How often does this happen, when your heart feels like that I mean?
‘Quite a lot’ Haru mumbled to his lap. ‘Mostly when I’m around other people…’
‘It may just be stress’ she said to him, ‘I’ll take a blood test just in case.’
The nurse left the room for a few moments, returning a short while later with a small plastic box. From it she took a needle, cleaning a small area of Haru’s arm before lifting the needle.
He flinched as she touched him, turning his head away.
‘It’s ok’ she spoke soothingly, ‘you’ll just feel a slight sting.’
Haru made a slight sound as the needle went in, tensing his body and gritting his teeth.
He waited a few seconds as the nurse drew blood, sighing with relief when she took the needle out, but he didn’t look back at her, too scared of seeing the needle.
‘If you have any problems’ she said to him, ‘please don’t hesitate to come to me at any time.’
She dapped his arm with a cloth and put a small plaster on the spot the needle had gone in.
‘Do you feel better now?’
He at last looked back at her, his expression breaking into a smile.
‘Thank you so much’ he said to her, ‘I do feel better.’
‘Don’t let other people make you feel low’ she said to him, and his expression fell, watching her with worry now, ‘people who try to intimidate you or make you feel that way are not worth it.’ She smiled. ‘You should just ignore them, they’re only words.’
‘Words carry meaning’ he said to her. ‘*Love*….is just a word.’
She smiled wider at that.
‘Of course it is’ she said, ‘but people who want to hurt you are not worth listening to, do you understand?’
He closed his mouth, blinking at her.
‘Yes’ he breathed. ‘Th-thank you.’
She nodded. ‘You can stay here if you like, I have informed the teacher you won’t be attending next class.’
‘Oh no you don’t have to do that’ Haru fumbled.
‘It’s alright’ the nurse told him as she moved away, ‘I’ve already let your teacher know. He’s fine with it.’
Haru supressed a groan as she left the room, leaning forwards on his knees clasping his hands together. He stared at the floor beneath him.
He hated this. He didn’t want special treatment. He didn’t want to be made to feel different.
‘No doubt my father will hear about this’ he spoke glumly to himself, once the nurse had left the room.

He left shortly after, and sat in the grounds alone, upon a raised flowerbed in a secluded area, the tree in the centre of the flowerbed behind him casting a shadow upon him.

He was lost in thought now, and did not notice Aubrey approaching him.
'What's eating you?'
Haru glanced up, jumping slightly. He hadn't heard him coming.
'Oh, Aubrey…it's you…'
Aubrey smirked. 'You almost sound disappointed to see me.'
'Oh no' Haru spoke hastily. 'It's nothing like that!'
'Have you been crying?'
Haru stared at him, thinking for a moment about objecting. But in the end, he just let out a sigh, slumping his shoulders.
'I guess there's no point denying it' he mumbled.
'What happened?' Aubrey asked him seriously.
'Aw just some kids' Haru replied nonchalant. 'It's nothing…'
'What did they say to you?'
Haru hesitated, before glancing up at Aubrey.
'It doesn't matter' Haru said to him.
'Please tell me…'
Haru let out a reluctant sigh.
'They were calling me '*rich kid*'…'
'Why?'
Haru kicked his feet, staring at the floor.
'I don't like to talk about it' he grumbled, 'but my family has a lot of money...and people often treat me differently because of it, either they are nice because they want something…or they hate you for having what they don't…' a sad expression crossed his face. 'I don't care about money…. truth be told I don't really want any of it…I only care about…. about…'
'About what?' Aubrey asked.
'About *living*' Haru replied. 'Being myself…making friends…. I have a dream that I can one day meet someone…have kids…. get a job….'
He bowed his head, putting his hands between his knees.
'It's stupid' he mumbled.
'If those guys bother you again just let me know' Aubrey told him. 'I'll sort them out.'
'Oh no I don't want any violence' Haru fumbled.
'Its only violence if they fight back.'
'Please' Haru begged.
'Alright' Aubrey relented. 'I won't do anything.'
'Thank you' Haru sighed, relaxing now.
'Do you want to come to the drama hall with us?' he offered. 'You can see what we've been up to so far.'
'Sure' Haru said rising. 'I would love to.'
They walked side by side as they headed towards the buildings, Haru glancing tentatively towards Aubrey as they went.
'Um…' Haru began. 'Aren't you supposed to be in class right now?'
'I skipped' Aubrey replied with a wide grin. 'I'm a delinquent remember? I have to keep up appearances.'
'Oh' Haru smiled awkwardly at that. 'R-right. I forget.'

Haru began to smile then, letting out a relaxed sigh.
He felt happier now that Aubrey was with him.
‘What about the others?’ Haru asked. ‘Shouldn’t they be in class?’
‘They do what I tell them to’ Aubrey gleamed back.
Haru turned away with a scoff.
‘Yeah right…’

They reached the drama hall, and Haru saw that the others were indeed here.
‘Oh Haru’ Sasha beamed, stopping her performance. ‘It’s you.’
‘I’m here too you know’ Aubrey spoke up as they moved further into the hall, but Sasha ignored him.
‘It’s great that we’re all here now’ Amelia spoke joyfully.
She and Ben were sitting before the stage, around their chairs were several opened boxes that were filled with props, several were scattered on the floor as they had tried to sort through them.
‘I’m sorry I didn’t mean to interrupt’ Haru mumbled.
‘Oh, don’t be silly’ Sasha waved him away, crouching and slipping down from the stage, moving over to them. ‘And stop apologising for everything.’
She was wearing a very wide-brimmed hat with a fabulously bright red feather pinned at the side, the hat itself was bright yellow.
‘Is that an ostrich feather?’ Haru asked, standing before Sasha now as the others watched them silently.
‘Yeah, it’s nice isn’t it?’ she gleamed, taking it off her head and shoving it down roughly onto Haru’s head. ‘What do you think?’
‘Yeah is really nice’ Haru said straightening up again and tipping the hat back on his head so that it didn’t cover his eyes. ‘I really like it, it’s so pretty.’
‘You can keep it if you want.’
‘Oh no I couldn’t’ Haru fumbled. ‘That would be stealing.’
‘Everything here is donated’ Aubrey beside him explained. ‘They wouldn’t even notice. Heck, half the stuff here *we* donated ourselves. Didn’t we Amelia?’ Aubrey spoke to her.
‘We sure did’ Amelia gleamed. ‘That hat belonged to my grandmother, she really did dress fabulously. Look’ she said, turning back to one of the boxes at her feet and reaching into it. ‘Do you like it?’ she asked pulling from the box a fox-fur scarf. ‘This is the real thing’ she told them, ‘sadly… I don’t really like fur…. But it’s here already and so….’ She brought it to her face then, snuggling into it. ‘It’s really soft’ she mumbled, ‘but smells a little dusty.’
‘Forget that’ Ben sitting beside her scoffed. ‘I like this’ he said, bringing from the box at his feet a hat (that looked more like a helmet) with a rotor blade on the top.’
‘Oh waw’ Haru gleamed. ‘I’ve never seen anything like that out of a cartoon.’
‘Here’ Ben gleamed, moving towards him and handing it over.
Haru took it from him, holding it in both his hands. He raised a hand to spin the blade, glancing back up at Ben happily.
‘It’s so cool’ Haru breathed.

‘So, do you still wanna be in the play?’ Amelia offered, as Haru moved forwards to see what else was in the boxes.
‘I would love to’ Haru beamed excitedly, ‘that is…. if you still want me to.’
‘Don’t be silly’ Sasha told him firmly. ‘We wouldn’t have offered if we didn’t want you to.’
‘Yeah, what did I say about being nervous and stuff?’ Aubrey said to him.
‘You never said anything like that’ Haru replied quietly, a little uncertain now.
‘Well I’m saying it now’ Aubrey gleamed.
Haru chuckled lightly behind his hands at this.
‘You’re so funny’ he smiled to Aubrey.
‘Thanks buddy!’ Aubrey gleamed back.
Haru’s attention lingered on Aubrey then, he tensed suddenly, glancing away hastily, feeling a jolt in his heart.
‘I um…’ Haru said, taking the yellow hat off his head. ‘I can’t take this’ he said handing it back to Sasha. ‘It belongs in this drama hall.’
‘Ok’ Sasha frowned in amusement, ‘if you say so.’
She took the hat from him, tossing it back into one of the open boxes on the floor.
‘So, um…’ Haru began, ‘how is the show going?’
‘We haven’t decided still on what we’re going to perform’ Sasha said to him. ‘We’re still just messing around.’
‘Oh, I see’ Haru mumbled with a smile.
Beside him Aubrey frowned down at him.
‘Hey I have an idea’ he blurted suddenly. ‘Why don’t we perform *Courage of the Black Nightingale*?’
Haru cast a look to Aubrey, eyes wide with surprise. Sasha and Amelia both began to clap lightly with approval at the suggestion.
‘I’m afraid I don’t know that one’ Ben voiced.
‘It’s a story of love, loss and betrayal’ Aubrey told him dramatically.
‘And…’ Haru added, ‘learning to trust again.’
He and Aubrey shared a glance then.
‘I think it’s a great idea’ Aubrey continued, turning back to Ben.
‘Great’ Ben smiled. ‘Then let’s do it.’
Aubrey turned back to glance at Haru with a smile. Haru stared back tentatively, before sighing, and smiling in return.
‘Let’s make a start then’ Sasha voiced, ‘we should…’
The door to the hall suddenly opened, and one of the teachers entered.
‘What are you lot doing here?’ she barked. ‘Why are you not in class?’
Haru tensed suddenly as the others around him instantly scattered, running in all directions.
Aubrey escaped through a nearby window, and the others ran backstage, escaping through a door hidden at the back of the hall.
Only Haru remained.
He glanced back at the teacher nervously, alone now in the hall.
He swallowed the lump in his throat.

Chapter Four

‘I didn’t get in any trouble’ Haru told Aubrey the next day. ‘I was given permission to skip class so….’
‘Lucky’ Aubrey glowered. ‘I got in trouble. I got detention for days! I’m not allowed any free time, I have to be either in class or in my dormitory.’
‘Then what are you doing here now?’ Haru asked him. ‘Shouldn’t you be in detention?’
‘No, I ran away’ Aubrey replied sullenly, resting his chin on his knee as they sat on the bench at the edge of the grounds, ‘I’m a delinquent remember?’
Haru turned away with a groan, bowing his head. ‘You shouldn’t do stuff like that….. and I’m not lucky for skipping class. I had to skip class because the others were picking on me… I was having chest pains…I had a panic attack.’
Aubrey glanced towards him then, listening silently.
‘I got the tests back earlier today… the results for my blood test. They didn’t find anything wrong….so um…. the nurse thinks it’s just stress.’
Aubrey looked away then, staring towards the buildings nearby.
‘School….’ he began, ‘…can be hard…’
‘We should find a time to do the play together’ Haru said, placing his hands on his lap and leaning back.
‘Yeah’ Aubrey said distractedly. ‘That would be nice.’
‘But we need to do it in a way that won’t get anyone in trouble’ Haru said turning to Aubrey, who glanced back at him. ‘Promise you won’t get yourself in trouble like that again.’
‘And why would I do that?’ Aubrey laughed, waving him away. ‘Aint nobody gonna tell me what do to.’
‘Aubrey please.’
Aubrey frowned, letting out a sigh. ‘Fine’ he relented. ‘I will *try* to be good. Happy?
‘Yes’ Haru gleamed. ‘I am. It’s not good to break the rules.’
‘If you say so’ Aubrey replied turning away. ‘I’m just trying to keep up my reputation as a delinquent. So, what do you like to do?’ Aubrey asked him suddenly changing the subject.
‘Me?’ Haru said, tensing slightly. ‘I…I don’t know what you mean. I don’t really do anything.’
‘Your records say you play the violin.’
Haru stared at Aubrey in shock.
‘How do you know that?’
‘Are you any good?’ Aubrey teased.
‘Wait…you looked at my records?’ Haru asked, ignoring the question as he suddenly realised what Aubrey had said.
‘Yeah I did’ Aubrey gleamed cheekily. ‘In the main office. The lock’s easy to get around. You know why? Because I had a key. I pickpocketed off the staff. Don’t worry I put it back.’
‘You saw my records!’ Haru spoke angrily now, raising his voice.
‘Hey I didn’t see anything much. Just your previous school records and stuff. You’re pretty rubbish in all your subjects aren’t you?’ Aubrey teased. ‘Well except for music.’

‘And art’ Haru glowered, hugging his knees to his chest.
Aubrey shuffled up closer to him on the bench they sat.
‘You’re not mad at me are you?’
‘You’re looking at my personal files’ Haru told him sullenly. ‘You shouldn’t do that.’
‘Tell me how I can make it up to you’ Aubrey spoke seriously.
Haru groaned, hunching his shoulders and bowing his head as he hugged himself tighter.
‘I want to do the play’ he said. ‘But I want to do it properly without getting in trouble.’
‘Well ok’ Aubrey replied. ‘Let’s start arranging times we can all meet. Let’s go see the girls first and ask when they’re free. Sasha and Amelia should be in their dorms now.’
‘Are we allowed in the girl’s dorms?’ Haru asked nervously.
‘Don’t know!’ Aubrey grinned merrily, rising to his feet and waving back at him as he began to saunter away. ‘Are you coming?’
‘Yeah’ Haru replied beginning to feel very nervous. ‘I’m coming.’
They walked side by side back towards the buildings, Haru’s left hand twitched involuntarily as they went.

They reached the girls dorm, the corridors of which were mostly deserted.
‘So, um, do you know which room they’re in?’ Haru asked nervously as they went.
‘Sure I do’ Aubrey said stopping abruptly, causing Haru to bump into him.
‘Careful’ Aubrey said as Haru stumbled back before righting himself.
‘Ha’ Haru gave a laugh. ‘S-sorry.’
Aubrey frowned at him, before turning away towards the door he had stopped beside and knocking.
He turned to stare playfully at Haru as they waited for someone to answer the door, Haru beginning to blush quickly turned away, looking towards the floor.
The door opened seconds later.
‘Oh, it’s you’ Sasha said in a flat tone. ‘Oh hey Haru’ she said to him, and Haru waved awkwardly to her. ‘What can I do for you?’ Sasha spoke in a more welcoming tone, straightening up and letting the door open a little more.
‘May we come in?’ Aubrey asked.
‘And since when were you so polite?’ Sasha said giving him a pouty face. ‘Fine, you can come in.’
She stepped back from the door, allowing them to enter, Aubrey sauntering before Haru who stepped forwards tentatively.
‘Oh waw’ Haru gasped glancing about the room.
All around them in many vases, were bouquets of purple tulips, several upon the desk between the beds, several on the window sill, and even some on the floor.
‘It’s really beautiful in here’ Haru mumbled, smiling warmly, his eyes shining.
‘Do you like them?’ Amelia asked a little shy now, she was sitting cross-legged on her own bed.
‘I love them’ Haru said.
‘I….’ Amelia began, ‘I love tulips, purple ones especially.’ She straightened as Sasha closed the door after them. ‘It’s so nice to see you both’ she told them.

‘So what can we do for you?’ Sasha asked, moving across the room and sitting heavily on her own bed, leaning back.
‘It’s about the play’ Aubrey began.
‘Is something wrong?’ Sasha asked quickly, her expression turning into a frown.
‘No, its nothing like that’ Aubrey said hastily. ‘We were just thinking’ he said glancing towards Haru as he spoke, ‘we need to arrange times when we’re all free so we can meet up regularly to practice the play.’ Aubrey smiled at Haru. ‘We don’t want to get in trouble again now do we?’
‘Who’s getting in trouble?’ Sasha asked raising an eyebrow.
‘I got detention’ Aubrey said flatly.
‘Ha! You should have been faster’ Sasha told him.
‘You mean you didn’t?’ Aubrey whined.
‘Nope’ Sasha gleamed.
‘Nope’ Amelia winked back.
‘You’re kidding’ Aubrey laughed with a shake of his head, placing his hands on his hips. ‘Unbelievable.’
‘So what days did you have in mind?’ Amelia asked Aubrey.
‘Hang on a mo.’
Aubrey dug around in his pockets for a moment before slumping his shoulders.
‘Do you have a paper and pen?’ he asked them.
Sasha reached for the draw nearby, taking out a notebook and pen and placing it open on her lap.
‘This is our opportunity to get more organised’ she said. ‘What days are we all free?’
‘I’m free every lunch and after classes’ Aubrey said in a flat voice. ‘I’m a prisoner here. I’m not allowed to leave.’
Sasha said nothing, only rolled her eyes at him.
‘I can’t do Wednesday and Thursday lunch because of my music class’ Amelia said raising a hand, and Sasha began to jot this down on the paper.
‘You take music class?’ Haru voiced then, blinking with surprise at Amelia.
‘Yeah’ she replied happily. ‘Do you like music?’
‘Ah’ Haru breathed. ‘Uh…yeah I do.’
‘So is there any other time someone isn’t free?’ Sasha interrupted.
‘No, I think we’re good.’
‘That was a group answer’ Sasha said stonily to Aubrey who stood there looking smug.
‘I think that’s all’ Amelia smiled.
‘And you Haru?’ Sasha addressed him. ‘Are there any days you can’t come?’
‘No, I’m free whenever’ Haru replied.
‘Great, so that’s only Wednesday and Thursday lunch’ Sasha mumbled to herself jotting it down.
‘And no one’s skipping class anymore’ Haru added with a laugh. ‘I don’t like breaking the rules.’
Aubrey glanced his way again with a comical frown, head tilted playfully at Haru.
‘So we start tomorrow lunch’ Sasha began.

‘Sounds like a plan’ Aubrey waved at her. ‘We’re doing this properly now, that’s so exciting.’
‘Great’ Amelia said, hunching her shoulders happily. ‘This is going to be fun!’
‘It sure is’ Sasha gleamed casting a glance over at her.
‘It sure is’ Aubrey repeated, causing Sasha and Amelia both to frown at him.
Aubrey smirked at them both, before turning to glance at Haru.
‘It sure is’ Haru smiled.

The next day Haru woke early feeling nervous, feeling scared. He glanced across his dorm towards the other bed, which was still empty. His roommate still had not returned, he had not met him yet.
Haru let out a sigh, sitting up and throwing the bedsheets back. He gazed out the window for a moment, towards the grounds outside.
There was a chill in the air this morning, but the sun outside was shining brightly through the mist. It was going to be a beautiful day.
Haru rose and dressed quickly, grabbing his bag and books and making his way to his first class, walking with his head down.
His classes were difficult, and he endured them as best he could, but still could not ignore the teasing stares some of the other boys gave him, the sharp comments of *‘rich kid’* as they whispered behind his back.
Needless to say, it was a great relief to finally leave for lunch, and he ran straight to the drama hall with a spring in his step, but with a tension around his heart. He felt growing trepidation with every footstep.
He felt nervous at first when he saw the hall was empty, lingering in the doorway for a moment before stepping in and moving closer towards the stage.
A figure came out from behind the curtain then, hearing the sound of him enter.
‘Oh good, you’re here’ Aubrey gleamed at him.
‘Um…what are you wearing?’ Haru asked uncertainly, glancing down at Aubrey’s body.
Aubrey wore a bright blue suit with a clean white scarf folded around his neck. Upon the suit itself were patterns depicting peacock feathers, and around his waist, almost like a skirt, was a great fan of feathers of deep green and blue. And at his wrists the fabric was long, frilly and white.
Aubrey brushed his black hair back, flicking it out of his face playfully.
‘Do you like what you see?’ Aubrey teased. ‘I’m pretty aren’t I?’
Haru pursed his lips then, eyes wide as he stared up at Aubrey on the stage.
‘Are you blushing?’
‘No!’ Haru protested. ‘I…I wasn’t.’
‘Whatever you say dweeb’ Aubrey teased.
‘Dweeb?’
Aubrey looked over Haru’s head as the doors to the hall opened again, and Sasha, Amelia and Ben came all came in at the same time.
‘Look we found him!’ Amelia called happily, hugging onto Ben’s arm.
‘Great we’re all here’ Sasha clapped. ‘Shall we begin?’

They started planning together, who would play as which character, positions of the actors and costumes and the script. It was a lot of work for everyone, but at this point they were still practicing and testing things out, seeing what would work and what wouldn't. Nothing yet was set, and as the others had fun messing around and playing with ideas, it was all Haru could do to keep a brave face.
When lunch was over, he didn't go to his next class, instead he ran to his dormitory, which he knew would be empty. He knew he would be alone here.
He fell on the bed, hugging the pillow to him and sobbing, his cries muffled as his body shook.

The next day at lunchtime, the five of them met up again.
'So where shall we start?' Sasha began as the others gathered around her. 'Let's try on some costumes.'
'Shouldn't we decide who's acting what part first?' Haru suggested tentatively.
'Nah' Aubrey waved happily at him. 'We always do things this way. It's more fun this way.'
'Did you have an idea of who you wanted to be in the play?' Amelia asked Haru.
'No' Haru replied. 'I don't mind really.'
'That's alright' Ben said, sitting back on one of the seats. 'The truth is we spend most of the time messing around anyway. We'd get so much more done but…' he smiled then, 'it's all about the fun.'
'Oh, I want to try something 'Aubrey said suddenly, turning to Amelia beside him and grabbing her by the wrist, dragging her up onto the stage.
'Hold on' Amelia laughed, stumbling after him.
'Hey Aubrey' Sasha called, turning towards the stage then, 'what do you have there in your hand?'
Aubrey waved the papers at her briefly, before handing one of them to Amelia.
'You're Levy' Aubrey said to Amelia, she took the paper from him. 'You wouldn't lie to me…would you?' Aubrey voiced, speaking in a dramatic voice now as he read from the paper. 'Levy…. I need you.'
Amelia glanced briefly down at the paper, quickly gathering herself.
'What's wrong?' Amelia replied, acting now as the character Levy. 'Are you alright?'
'You…. love me right….?
'Yeah….'
'You love me?'
'Yes' Levy replied.
'You don't plan on leaving me do you, you won't ever…?
'I don't plan on leaving you Austin.'
'You won't. Ever leave me. Right?'
'What's gotten into you?' Levy asked. 'Why are you asking me these questions?'
'You wouldn't lie to me, would you?'
'No.'
'You wouldn't lie to me?'
'No! I would never lie to you. I love you.'

‘You swear.’
‘Yes. I love you.’
Aubrey tensed suddenly, gripping his hair, hunched over.
‘Good’ Austin said. ‘I love you too.’
He grabbed her then, hand grasped around her throat, Amelia did not react, but tilted her head backwards, allowing him to grasp her more easily.
‘I saw you with him’ Aubrey hissed, glancing briefly at his paper before looking back at her. ‘I saw you with him.’ He shoved her back then, and she fell to the ground. ‘I saw you with him, I saw you kissing him.’ He bent down to her then, grabbing her roughly by the hair and shaking her, Amelia screamed. ‘You were supposed to belong to me!’ Aubrey screamed over her. ‘All of you’ Aubrey breathed, kneeling over Amelia now, grabbing her by the face with one hand, with the other holding her roughly the hair. He spoke in a dangerous whisper now.
‘Oh, how sordid’ Sasha gleamed cruelly, watching the performance, beside her Ben looked on calmly, but on her other side, Haru was afraid.
‘All of you belongs to me…...right?’
‘Yeah…’Amelia whimpered, ‘please…’
‘I’ll cut out your heart…. keep it really close to me’ Austin whispered dangerously.
‘Someone help me!’ Amelia screamed.
‘You’ll die now’ Austin cried, raising his fist, holding an imaginary knife.
Amelia began to scream at the top of her lungs, struggling in his hold.
‘Oh no Levy…you’re bleeding out. Don’t die just yet.’
Amelia began to whimper.
‘Kiss me’ Austin whispered, holding Amelia by the back of the head. ‘I need you alive for this…’
Aubrey leaned forwards, actually kissing Amelia softly on the lips, she lay there, limp in his arms.
‘I love you….’ Aubrey whispered into her ear, loud enough for the others to hear. ‘Goodbye.’
Sasha began to clap loudly behind them, smiling at them before lowering her hands.
‘Very good’ she declared, as Ben beside her nodded approvingly. ‘What did you think Haru?’
‘It was…beautiful’ Haru breathed, ‘and…scary…’
Aubrey frowned at him, releasing Amelia before straightening again.
‘That was really incredible’ Haru said breathy now as Aubrey rose, turning to help Amelia to her feet. ‘It was…. oh….’ he sighed, smiling then. ‘I wish I could do something like that, it was really convincing.’
‘Well you can if you give it a try’ Aubrey said, placing his hands upon his hips and grinning at him. ‘Acting is in the heart’ Aubrey said, pressing his hand upon his own chest in a genuine gesture. ‘It comes from within.’
‘I’ve never really been confident’ Haru admitted. ‘I don’t know if I could do something like that.’
Aubrey snapped his fingers then. ‘Hey I’ve got an idea!’ he spoke to Haru with a smile. ‘Why don’t you take the lead role in this play?’ Aubrey suggested.
‘What?’ Haru gasped.
‘That will help you build your confidence, right? Performing in front of a crowd?’
‘I suppose’ Haru trailed off. ‘But I don’t know if I could do that.’

‘Well that’s ok’ Aubrey grinned. ‘You can practice in front of us.’
‘That sounds great’ Sasha cried out. ‘You could be the lead role.’
‘Oh no I don’t know if that’s a good idea’ Haru said beginning to panic a little.
‘Don’t be silly’ Sasha waved at him. ‘It will defiantly help with your confidence’ she said. ‘Ben used to have terrible stage-fright, he would freeze up and begin to sweat.’
‘Is that true Ben?’ Haru asked him.
‘Yeah’ Ben replied calmly. ‘Acting on stage was difficult at first, but it made me become a better person, I grew because of it. I’m *way* more confident now, and it was all because of acting. Cool right?’
‘Oh waw’ Haru sighed longingly. ‘That sounds amazing.’
‘So will you do it?’ Amelia asked.
‘I’ll give it a try’ Haru replied, hiding his reluctance.
‘You should answer with a bit more confidence’ Aubrey told him. ‘Will you do it?’ Aubrey asked him again.
Haru hunched his shoulders, balling his fists on his lap before looking up towards the others again.
‘I’ll definitely do it’ he spoke more firmly now. ‘It’ll be fun.’
Beside him Aubrey smiled, tilting his head playfully at him.
‘That’s more like it’ he said.
Haru went to his next class feeling excited. Feeling nervous, and even a little scared, but happy.
Not even the teasing of the boys around him could bring him down.
Later that day after classes had finished, Haru headed back to his dorm, intending to sit quietly alone and study.
Along the way, he saw a figure a short distance away, lurking behind a tree.
Haru tensed suddenly, recognising the cloaked figure.
‘….Aubrey?’
Aubrey raised his head then, meeting Haru’s eyes briefly, before gliding backwards and hiding himself amongst the trees.
Haru ran towards him, searching for him amongst the trees. But to his disappointment after several minutes of searching, he could not find Aubrey.
Haru let out a weary sigh, bowing his head, feeling disappointed and dejected. He returned to his dormitory and sat heavily on the bed, taking out his books from his bag and placing them on his lap.
He looked out of his window towards the darkening sky. It was not that late, but it seemed that the night had deciding to come early.
He sat on the edge of his bed gazing through the window. He did not read his books, instead continued to stare at the sky, and at the stars that grew with brightness with every passing minute.
Eventually he began to feel tired, placing his books down upon the floor beside the bed, and lying down, resting on his side.
Haru blinked once, letting out a breath, he closed his eyes, quickly beginning to nod off, and was asleep in minutes.
It was less than twenty minutes later, there came a knock at his window.

At first Haru heard it in his dream, but as the tapping continued, Haru slowly began to wake, opening his eyes and blinking.
He sat up, looking towards the window, seeing the dark shape of a head beyond the glass.
Haru let out a cry of shock, jumping back in fright. He stayed there for a moment, staring wide-eyed at the figure in the window before regaining himself.
He leant forwards, opening the window so that he could speak to the figure.
'Aubrey what are you doing?!' Haru spoke in a frantic whisper.
'Can I come in?' Aubrey asked politely, hanging by his fingertips precariously from the ledge below his window.
Haru grabbed him by the arm, pulling him inside urgently, helping Aubrey as he climbed through the window and into his room.
'What on earth are you doing here?'
'I came to see you' Aubrey said. 'I have something I'd like to tell you.'
Haru frowned down at Aubrey as he straightened up, lowering his hood.
'We're practicing in the drama hall now' Aubrey whispered to him excitedly, 'all of us are there. We're going to practice in the dark, with only candles to light our way. Isn't that going to be so…...atmospheric?'
Haru let out a slow gasp then, eyes wide with excitement.
'So you're excited?' Aubrey asked him.
'I've never…' Haru uttered, '…done anything like that before.'
Aubrey's eyes shone wildly at Haru, his grin almost predatory now.
'It's going to be so much fun' he breathed excitedly, 'but we have to be quiet' he said, bringing his finger to his lips. 'We wouldn't want anyone finding us.'
Aubrey stepped lightly across the room, moving over towards the door.
He paused before it, turning back to Haru.
'Are you coming?' he asked him.
Haru felt his heart skip a beat, eyes wide in the dark room.
He stepped over towards Aubrey as he opened the door, following him out of the room.
'I hope I didn't interrupt your studying' Aubrey spoke in a hushed voice as they made their way along the silent corridor.
'No' Haru answered. 'I wasn't…um…' he trailed off.
'Trouble studying?' Aubrey asked.
'I'm not doing well in my classes' Haru admitted glumly as they went. 'I'm behind everyone else so… I have to do some extra work.'
Haru glanced sideway at Aubrey.
'I've got a lot to learn' Haru said, 'but I just can't get anything to stick.'
'You're trying too hard' Aubrey told him.
'That's not very helpful advice….'
They descended the stairs together, walking side by side, they headed outside.
'The night is so cool and beautiful' Haru said pausing and gazing up at the stars.
'Hey look a bat!' Aubrey voiced. 'Did you see that just then? It's chasing moths in that light by that building.' He glanced back at Haru then. 'Come on, keep up' he hissed in a whisper to Haru who lingered behind him.
'S-sorry' Haru called after him, jogging to keep up.

‘Man, you’re such an air-head.’
‘You were just staring at bats’ Haru scowled in annoyance.
They entered the building across the grounds, moving swiftly down the corridor, they entered the drama hall.
Sasha, Amelia and Ben were already there, turning towards them both as they entered.
The scene looked magical, all of them were wearing witch’s hats, and were carrying burning lanterns on the ends of chains.
Amelia giggled at them, pulling her hat back so she could see them more clearly.
‘Welcome’ she announced. ‘Welcome.’
Haru approached the three, grinning wildly, the lights from the candles shining in his eyes.
‘You will be the main character’ Sasha said approaching him, draping a cloth over his shoulder as she did so, part of his costume for the play.
Haru took it off his shoulders, feeling the fabric between his fingers.
‘Waw’ he breathed. ‘It’s beautiful.’
‘I got one just like it’ Aubrey said, opening his cloak then to reveal the shirt he wore beneath.
Haru looked at Aubrey’s shirt, the fabric sparkling with every movement, the light catching in the dim hall.
‘It looks like the stars in space’ Haru mumbled.
‘Hmm?’
‘Ah’ Haru breathed. ‘Nothing.’
‘Do you like it?’ Aubrey asked him.
‘I love it.’
‘We match!’ Aubrey sung happily, lifting the edges of his cloak like wings.
‘Alright you swaggering peacock’ Sasha said waving him away with an irritated expression.
‘Don’t forget that Haru is the lead role in this play. Don’t go stealing the show now, kay?’
‘I wouldn’t dream of it’ Aubrey chuckled, maintaining his happy demeanour and ridiculous grin.
‘Alright’ Ben said, speaking clearly so that he would be heard. ‘Let’s start.’

Chapter Five

They practiced late into the night and early hours of the morning.
By the time Haru finally went to bed he was exhausted, sleeping for only a few hours before getting up again for classes.
It was difficult that day for him, and there were a certain group of boys who had picked him out.
‘Hey whacha doing?’ one of them said, stepping uncomfortably close to him in a threatening manner.
‘N-nothing’ Haru fumbled, hugging the notes to his chest.
One of the boys on his other side that he did not see snatched the notes suddenly from him.
‘What are you working on, is this a play?’

‘Give it back!’ Haru said indignantly.
‘We don’t want to’ the boy said with an unfriendly smirk.
‘Are you in that stupid little club with the rest of those losers?’
Haru turned to the boy that had spoken. There were three of them before him now, and the one that had spoken was the tallest. He had fiery orange hair and was very handsome.
‘Th-they’re not losers’ Haru protested, cheeks flushed.
The boys around him immediately began to make fun of his stutter.
Haru looked down, grasping his head and gritting his teeth, tears beginning to shimmer in his eyes.
‘Hey!’ a voice called out then.
The boys looked around then towards the figure, Haru couldn’t see him clearly through his tears, but he recognised the voice.
‘Aubrey?’ he whimpered sadly.
‘Get out of here Kyle’ Aubrey snapped, his voice commanding.
‘Oh, it’s you’ the boy with fiery orange hair said turning towards him. ‘Why are *you* here?’
‘I can go wherever I want’ Aubrey answered sharply. ‘Now get out of here before I break your legs.’
‘I’d like to see you try’ Kyle grinned spitefully, standing there with his hands in his pockets. ‘I think it may be a bit difficult for you to fight all of us’ he said in a jovial voice, his expression happy.
The other boys had turned towards Aubrey now, and behind them, Haru looked on in fear, unsure of what would happen.
‘I bet I could take you on’ Aubrey gleamed slyly, standing to the side.
‘N-no please don’t fight’ Haru cried out, his voice breaking, ‘please!’
Aubrey smiled to him then, looking past the other boys. ‘I will always stick up for my friends’ he spoke kindly, before his expression turned dark again.
‘Now get out of here’ he said to the boys, ‘I won’t say it again, and I won’t hesitate to fight you either.’
Kyle and the boys either side of him watched him with level expressions, lingering for a moment, before turning away.
‘You’re not worth the trouble anyway’ Kyle muttered under his breath as he stalked away. ‘Stupid scum.’
He left.
Haru let out a heavy sigh, watching the boys go, before turning back to Aubrey, who approached him.
Aubrey bent down, picking up the papers the boys had dropped and handing them back to Haru.
‘Are you ok?’ Aubrey asked him.
‘Yeah’ Haru replied sullenly, taking the papers back from Aubrey. ‘Thanks’ he said sniffing.
‘I’m sorry….’ He breathed beginning to sob.
Aubrey frowned at him, taking out a pack of tissues from his pocket and offering him one.
‘Thanks’ Haru whimpered, dapping at his eyes. ‘I’m sorry’ he whispered again.
‘You need to stick up for yourself’ Aubrey told him seriously.
‘I know.’

It looked for a moment like Aubrey would continue, but he simply sighed, looking down at the papers Haru clutched in his hand.
'You've been reading over the script?' Aubrey asked.
'Yes' Haru said. 'I…wanted to read through it. I enjoy it.'
'That's great' Aubrey mumbled. 'I've got to go to class now though. Are you going to be ok?'
'Yeah' Haru gasped, smiling then, 'I'll be ok, I promise.'
'Alright then' Aubrey said. 'I guess I'll see you tomorrow at lunch for more practicing, are you looking forward to the play?'
'Yes, I am' Haru said enthusiastically, 'a little nervous though but….'
'Everyone is a little nervous when they first go on stage' Aubrey replied. 'I'll see you around' Aubrey said turning away then. 'Bye!'
Haru watched Aubrey walk away, feeling regret at seeing him go.
He swallowed the lump in his throat, turning.
Haru headed to his next class.

At the end of the day, when his last class had finished, Haru headed back to his dormitory.
He walked slowly, raising his head to the skies.
It was getting dark early, the clouds were thick and grey above him, and Haru could feel the moisture in the air. It would rain soon for sure.
Haru entered the building across the grounds, heading up the stairs.
When he opened the room to his dormitory, he gave a start.
'Who are you?' he stammered.
The boy sitting on the other bed raised his head.
'I'm Nate' he answered simply. 'You must be Haru.'
'Oh' Haru sighed then, taking a breath to calm his racing heart. 'I…yeah' he laughed. 'I am.'
He closed the door behind him.
'Sorry you frightened me a little.'
'So, you've been here longer than I have' Nate said to him as Haru made his way across the room, heading to his own bed.
Haru put his bag down on the floor and sat on his bed.
'Yeah' Haru said.
'You like it here?'
'Hmm' Haru thought for a moment. 'I do' he replied at last. 'It's um…difficult at times…I struggle in class…I'm not very good at the lessons' he laughed awkwardly, scratching the back of his head. 'I struggle to understand most of it. I feel like everyone is ahead of me in class.'
'Why is that?' Nate asked.
'Ah' Haru breathed. 'I just don't understand it.'
'I'm going to sleep' Nate told him. 'I'm very tired. I just got in, and my first class starts tomorrow.'
'Oh right' Haru said as Nate turned away from him, lying back in bed and becoming still.
Haru glanced nervously towards the window then, fearing Aubrey might appear again, not wanting to have to explain himself to Nate, he wished for Aubrey to stay away, which he did.

Haru slept uneasily that night, getting very little sleep. His alarm next morning went off, but Haru was already awake.
He sat up, surprised for an instant to see Nate there, forgetting for a moment that he had a roommate.
'Mmmoring' Haru spoke in a tired voice as Nate sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes.
'You didn't sleep well?' Nate asked.
'My mind wouldn't switch off' Haru said. 'I just…'
'I get days like that' Nate said casually rising from his bed. 'Now turn around, I need to get changed.'

Haru endured his first classes, struggling to stay awake. His body and mind became sharper towards the end of his class, becoming himself again as lunchtime came around.
He hurried to the drama hall.
He was the first to arrive, sitting nervously upon the stage, his left-hand twitching involuntarily as he waited.
Sasha was next to arrive after him, and she did so alone.
'Hey' Haru said to her, straightening as she skipped up to him.
'Aww, no none else is here yet?' Sasha said disappointed.
'They'll probably be here soon' Haru replied.
Sasha sat on the stage beside him, turning towards him and leaning into him with a smile.
'So how are you then?'
'I'm good' Haru replied nervously.
'You're looking a little flushed.'
'Hu?'
Sasha touched his cheek then, feeling his body heat.
'Are you ok?' she asked him seriously.
'I-uh…. I'm fine' Haru replied, blushing a little with nerves. 'I didn't sleep well.'
'Why?'
'I guess I had a lot on my mind.'
'Aubrey mentioned that there were some boys giving you a hard time' Sasha noted.
'He told you that!?' Haru said, mortified. 'Why did he say that?'
'He's only saying it out of concern. Don't keep things to yourself, it will only be worse.'
'I just don't like the attention' Haru mumbled in reply, looking back down to his lap, hunching his shoulders awkwardly.
'In all seriousness' Sasha told him. 'If you have something in life that's troubling you…you should say something.'
'Ok' Haru smiled.
'No, you're not taking me seriously' Sasha scowled.
'I am.'
'No, you're not' Sasha spoke angrily then. 'If you keep everything inside…just think of a wall of a dam breaking, and all the water coming out and flooding everything. Is that a good example? Oh, I don't know…' she said suddenly frustrated, hand going to her head. 'Look.'
She showed him the inside of her wrist then, and Haru felt a stab in his heart at what he saw.
There was a straight line running over the vein in her wrist.

Haru's eyes flickered back up to hers.
'How could you….do that?'
Sasha smiled sadly.
'There were these kids' she said, 'back in my old school. They would make my life a living hell every single day. The only reason I think that they targeted me…was because I was poor.'
The doors to the drama hall opened then, and Aubrey, Ben and Amelia walked in.
'Sorry we're late guys' Ben grinned, lifting a plastic bag he carried. 'We got food for everyone. We were thinking of eating first and practicing after if that's alright with everyone.'
'That sounds great' Sasha said loudly. 'Haru's looking a little unwell.'
'Are you alright Haru?' Amelia asked with concern, walking closer to the stage where Haru sat.
'I'm fine' Haru answered hastily, waving his hands at them defensively. 'I just didn't get much sleep.'
'Something on your mind squirt?'
Haru glared up at Aubrey in annoyance.
'I'm not a squirt' Haru said sullenly.
'I was just in the middle of a discussion with Haru' Sasha said.
'Is something up?' Aubrey asked.
'No' Sasha replied, 'we were just talking about those boys that were giving Haru a hard time' she told him, 'and then I showed him this' she said, exposing her wrist again.
Haru glanced nervously up at Aubrey.
'It's ok' Sasha spoke reassuringly, they already know.'
And as Haru glanced towards Ben and Amelia who were unpacking the food they had brought with them, he saw that they were watching him.
They do know Haru realised, seeing their expressions.
'It's just' Haru began speaking to Sasha now, '…um…'
'Go on' Sasha prompted. 'You can tell me.'
'If I did such a thing…I would be horrified if anyone found out. If I became so unhappy that I resorted to….um…you know' he said glancing towards the scar on her wrist again.
Sasha smiled at him warmly.
'It was almost too late for me' she said.
'Maybe we shouldn't be talking about this' Ben voiced. 'It's very dark.'
'No' Sasha spoke firmly. 'I want to. I'm trying to help. I don't want Haru doing the same thing.'
'I wouldn't never…' Haru began in shock.
'As I thought I would never' Sasha interrupted. 'I'm just trying to help you, I'm just trying to make you see.'
Haru closed his mouth then.
'Why did you do it?' he asked.
'I was severely depressed' Sasha answered. 'It's not something I can really make anyone understand. To feel so awful in life that you wish for death…to not care what your death would mean to your friends and family…but I was given a second chance.' Sasha smiled to

Aubrey then, who looked reluctantly back at her. ‘I realised afterwards what my death would have meant to those around me’ Sasha said. ‘My younger sister was horrified…I remember my parents both crying by my hospital bed. Just think how much worse it would have been if I had died’ Sasha said.
Haru bowed his head, biting back a sob, his eyes brimming with tears.
‘That’s awful…’ he whispered, not trusting his voice to speak. ‘I could never….’
‘Aubrey was the one to find me’ Sasha said, raising her head. ‘He tried to stop the bleeding, he tied something tight around my wrist to stop it and put pressure on the wound. My parents were out of the house, I think they were taking my sister to the doctors because of a throat infection, so I was home alone to do what I wanted.’
Haru lifted his eyes then to Aubrey, feeling so out of place suddenly as he wondered what it must have been like.
‘The blood was soaked into the carpet’ Sasha mumbled, ‘I…. I had bled a lot and cut deep. I had lost a lot of blood, I should not have survived, but I did.’
As she continued to speak, Aubrey watched her with a forlorn expression.
Ben and Amelia came over to them then, pulling up chairs beside the stage and placing food upon several of the chairs, sitting beside the stage.
‘My point is’ Sasha began, ‘that you are not just living for yourself in life. You are living for your parents, your friends and siblings and if you have any, your partner or children. You understand?’
‘Yeah’ Haru humbled. ‘I do.’

The next day, the teasing for Haru got worse, as the boys turned physical with him.
Kyle shoved him forwards onto the ground, Haru coughing as the dust was kicked up in his face.
‘How does the floor taste?’ Kyle laughed standing over him. ‘Pretty good for you I think.’
Haru immediately began to panic, sitting back on his heels and clutching as his chest painfully, gasping and wheezing as he began to hyperventilate, struggling to breath as his face turned red and flushed.
He heard sudden movement approaching fast and turned just in time to see Aubrey running up to one of the boys, swinging a punch at the one nearest him and barrelling into him.
Haru bowed his head again, closing his eyes and hugging himself, teeth gritted as he fought to control himself, tears streaming down his cheeks as the scuffle continued behind him.
Aubrey managed to fight the boys off, but not without getting hurt himself. It was not that he was stronger than the others, just more aggressive.
‘Haru!’
Aubrey knelt before him, grasping him by the shoulders as Haru continued to wheeze, his breathing panicked, he was unable to speak.
Aubrey put his hand over Haru’s nose and mouth then, forcing him to stop breathing, Haru opened his eyes in alarm, grabbing onto Aubrey’s hand, trying to pull it away.
‘No’ Aubrey spoke sharply, holding Haru tighter. ‘Control your breathing. Just calm!’

Haru stared back at Aubrey, eyes wide and teary, he closed them tight, fighting to control his breath until Aubrey finally took his hand away.
Haru began to cough violently, head bowed and shoulders hunched, but his breathing was regular now.
'I'm sorry' Haru gasping, maintaining control again. 'I…get so scared I…have panic attacks easily…. I just get so uneasy and nervous.'
'I know' Aubrey replied calmly.
Haru raised his head, looking at Aubrey properly now.
'Your face!'
'I know' Aubrey said again smiling, showing no pain for the cuts and bruises he wore now. 'They look pretty don't they? I can already feel them. I'm gonna look so badass.'
'You got hurt because of me' Haru sobbed, becoming upset again.
'I had to protect you' Aubrey replied seriously. He looked past Haru at that moment, seeing one of the teachers approaching. All around them people were staring. 'Its what friends do' Aubrey finished. 'I have to go' he added hastily, rising to his feet. 'Meet you later in the drama hall.'
He ran away then before the teacher could catch him, disappearing within the trees at the edges of the school grounds and out of sight.
The teacher arrived seconds later, and Haru explained what had happened. He visited the nurse briefly, before going away again, heading to the drama hall when it was lunchtime.

'Haru!' Amelia cried upon seeing him. 'You're here!'
They were all here in the drama hall, they had been waiting for him.
'Are you alright Haru?' Ben worried.
'Aubrey told us what happened' Sasha said, concern written over her face.
Haru glanced past them all now as they gathered around him, seeing Aubrey a short distance away, the bruises on his face more pronounced now.
'Aubrey….'
Haru felt an ache in his heart at that moment.
He looked back at the others, blinking tearfully back at them.
'Why are you all so nice to me?' he began then. 'All I asked was to be friends with you, I feel you're doing too much and that I cannot pay back your kindness.'
'It's not about debt or paying back' Aubrey told him as he approached.
'Why would you let yourself get hurt for me?' Haru sobbed, 'to see you get hurt….' He wiped away his tears angrily.
'I'm helping you because I know what it's like' Aubrey spoke, reaching for his pocket and bringing out a packet of tissues, offering them to Haru. 'It may be hard to believe but I was really shy once upon a time, and I was picked on a lot. But I forced myself to become stronger, to grow, and I did it on my own.'
'You did?' Haru mumbled, lifting his head again, voice breaking. He reached for the tissues Aubrey offered him. 'Really?'
'Sure' Aubrey nodded.
'That's amazing' Haru whimpered, still dabbing at his eyes. 'I wish I could be like that.'

‘You can’ Aubrey said. ‘Maybe someday’ he added in a teasing voice, ruffling Haru’s hair. ‘Now come on’ he said moving away. ‘Let’s start practicing.’
‘Are you sure you’re ok?’ Sasha asked him as the other moved away towards the stage.
‘Yeah, I’ll be fine’ Haru said, straightening then as he gathered himself. ‘I’m good…really!’
‘If you say so’ Sasha frowned, unconvinced.
She turned and walked away, Haru following after them.
They practiced for a short time before sitting to each their lunch.
‘Are you alright’ Aubrey asked Haru as they ate. ‘You look a little flustered.’
‘No, I’m fine’ Haru gasped. ‘It’s just a little hot in here.’
He bowed his head quickly, returning his attention to his food, avoiding the stares of the others as they watched him closely, suddenly feeling very self-conscious.
‘So how did you end up at this school?’ Ben asked him, changing the subject. ‘Did your parents want you to come here?’
‘S-something like that’ Haru mumbled. ‘I came here a few years after my mother passed away.’
‘Well I’ll tell you why *I’m* here’ Aubrey began loudly. ‘Neither of my parents have any interest in me. They just sent me here to get rid of me.’
‘Surely you don’t mean that’ Haru said, straightening then.
‘When I was about eight’ Aubrey replied, ‘my mother pushed me from a moving car. I still have the metal plate in my head.’ He tapped his head then with a nail, Haru heard the distinct metallic noise as he did. ‘I was returned to my parents afterwards’ Aubrey continued.
‘That’s awful’ Haru whined.
‘Its fine’ Aubrey waved away with a smile. ‘I don’t care about them anyway. My life is my own, I’m not going to let them bring me down. They sent me here to get me away from them, and I’m happy with that. I live across the waters. I took ferry to get here.’
‘Well I for one wanted to come here’ Amelia said. ‘I think this is a wonderful school.’
‘Meh’ Aubrey said, leaning back against his palm. ‘It’s ok. It feels kinda like a prison some days.’
‘I came here because of Amelia’ Sasha beamed happily, looking over at her. Amelia returned the gaze with a shy smile, before looking down at her lap.
‘My family moved here so I got stuck here’ Ben grumbled.
‘You don’t like it here?’ Haru asked him.
Ben shrugged. ‘I miss my old friends’ Ben replied, ‘but in life you move on and meet new people. Now I have wonderful new friends, but I will never forget the people I left behind.’
‘That’s really sweet’ Haru replied.
Ben turned to Haru then with a smile.
‘What do you want to do when you leave this school?’
‘I don’t really know what I want to do’ Haru admitted. ‘I just…I guess I will just get any job so I can pay the bills. I would love to just get a small place to live…find a partner and…you know…have some children?’
Sasha squealed in delight then, clapping her hands excitedly.
‘That’s so amazing’ she cried. ‘Little Haru-children running around. What fun!’
‘Well what about you?’ Haru asked Sasha. ‘Do you like children?’
‘I do’ Sasha gleamed. ‘I would love to be a nursery school teacher.’

‘I’d like to be a nurse’ Amelia spoke up.
‘What about you?’ Haru asked Ben. ‘What do you want to do when you graduate?’
‘I’m not sure really’ Ben replied, ‘I guess I would like to travel the world and get any work I can to pay for it.’
‘That’s so cool’ Amelia smiled. ‘But I’m going to be sad to see you go’ she said.
‘Yeah, me too’ Sasha sighed. ‘That sounds like an incredible thing, you’ll remember us won’t you? Please don’t forget.’
‘Of course, I won’t forget’ Ben laughed.
‘What about you?’ Haru asked Aubrey then. ‘What do you want to do?’
‘Me?’ Aubrey echoed. ‘I…I don’t really know. I don’t really want to do anything.’
‘Oh, come on’ Haru smiled, ‘you have to want to do *something*?’
‘Nah’ Aubrey smiled. ‘I’m a delinquent. I don’t really plan for the future, I just like to mess around and have fun.’
‘Do you like children?’ Haru asked him.
‘Sure’ Aubrey shrugged non-committedly. ‘Why not?’
They continued to practice a little longer after that, Haru in the centre stage performing one of the scenes as the lead role. He had remembered his lines for this scene and did not need to read from the paper. He acted now as the others watched him, sitting on chairs facing the stage.
Haru raised his arms, speaking loudly and clearly.
‘It just takes one act of bravery’ he said, ‘a single breath, a heartbeat……’ he glanced down at the others before him as they watched him silently. His heart beat heavy in his chest, and a wave of dizziness washed over him. ‘Ah…’ he gasped, ‘a single breath, a heartbeat. Just…just say the words……’ he lowered his arms, bowing his head then.
The others tensed slightly, brows furrowed.
‘Haru are you alright?’ Sasha voice nervously.
‘I uh…’ he brought his hand to his head then, wavering on the spot, ‘mmmmm.’
He fell to his knees suddenly, the others cried out in shock, rushing up to him.
‘Haru! Whats wrong?’
‘Go get a nurse!’ Sasha ordered Aubrey, who turned on the spot and ran out of the hall without pause.
‘Haru…’ Amelia whined, pressing a hand to his forehead. ‘He’s burning up.’
Ben kneeling beside him caught him in his arms as he fell into him, holding him firmly. ‘Haru?’
Haru did not answer, breathing slowly, eyes closed as his chest rose and fell gently, his cheeks flushed brightly.

‘He has a very high fever’ the nurse told them afterwards as they stood huddle outside the door to the room in which Haru rested. ‘He’s sleeping now’ the nurse continued.
‘Can we see him?’ Amelia asked timidly.
‘It’s best to just let him rest’ the nurse replied.
Amelia looked back towards the door worriedly.
‘Will he be ok?’ Aubrey asked.

‘He should be fine.’
‘Why can’t we see him?’ Aubrey pressed.
‘I’ve already said’ the nurse turned to him, speaking a little more firmly now. ‘He needs to rest. You can visit him tomorrow.’
Aubrey glared at his feet in annoyance.
‘I want to see him now’ he mumbled.
‘We shouldn’t annoy him’ Sasha voiced. ‘He’s needs to rest. Just let it go.’
Aubrey turned to face her with a surprised expression.
‘Let’s go’ Sasha said turning away. ‘Are you guys coming?’
The others slowly drifted after her, doing so only reluctantly.
When they were outside again, Sasha spoke to Aubrey.
‘We should leave him alone’ she pressed. ‘If I hear you’ve been visiting him in secret I’ll be pissed.’
‘What?’ Aubrey said defensively.
‘Don’t give me that’ Sasha snapped back. ‘You never listen to what anyone tells you like…ever!’
‘I do!’ Aubrey snapped back. ‘I’m just…’ he turned sharply away then before looking back. ‘I’m just worried about him, and I’m irritated with myself for not realising something was wrong. I should have seen…’
‘If you care for him then you should give him what he needs right now, which is rest.’
‘I just…’ Aubrey mumbled.
Ben who had been silent up until that point moved to stand beside him.
‘He’ll be fine’ he spoke encouragingly. ‘Why are you so worried?’
‘I guess…’ Aubrey murmured. ‘I don’t know…he just seems so weak…’
‘He’s not going to die’ Ben laughed. ‘It’s just a fever. He’ll be alright.’
‘You really think so?’
‘Yes, I do’ Ben spoke firmly.
Aubrey groaned unhappily, looking back to the floor again.
‘Anyway’ Sasha voiced, ‘I’m going back to my dorm, are you coming?’ she asked Amelia.
‘Uh…yeah I’m coming.’
‘I’m going back to my room too’ Ben mumbled, scratching the back of his head. ‘See you guys around?’ he said to the others.
The girls moved off as Aubrey waved to them. ‘I guess I’m going to just hang around outside’ he said to Ben. ‘I…need the fresh air.’
‘Sure’ Ben replied flatly. ‘Seriously though, let Haru rest, he’ll be ok.’
‘I promise I’ll leave him be’ Aubrey replied. ‘We can all visit him tomorrow.’
Ben nodded briefly before moving off. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow then’ he waved briefly as he walked away.
‘Sure’ Aubrey replied flatly. ‘Bye.’
He watched Ben go, before turning and wandering across the grounds. He sat upon the wall of a raised flowerbed, the tree behind him casting a shadow over him. He stayed out here for hours until the sun began to set, but still he remained here.
After a time, just as it was beginning to get really dark, he saw a figure walking across the grounds towards him, one of the teachers. No doubt his absence had been noted.

Aubrey rose to his feet, retreating further into the trees behind him and vanishing.
He could not be found.

The next morning, early before class he and the others visited Haru in the hospital wing.
'You feeling better?' Aubrey asked him.
'Yes, I feel much better' Haru smiled up at him, sitting up in bed now with his hands upon his lap. 'Um…. why do you look so tired' he asked Aubrey, 'are you alright?'
'I didn't get much sleep last night' Aubrey replied.
'I hope it's nothing bad' Haru worried.
'No, its fine' Aubrey waved him away, 'I just didn't feel like sleeping is all.'
'Aubrey is an idiot' Sasha glared at him. 'He spent all night wandering around outside. He's bound to get in trouble.'
'Why would you do that?' Haru asked him.
'I couldn't sleep' Aubrey answered flatly. 'Didn't want to. I had…. too much on my mind.'
Haru stared back at him with worry.
'When do you think you'll be able to leave?' Ben asked him.
'I don't know' Haru smiled weakly, 'I still feel a bit faint.'
'Well don't push yourself' Amelia told him. 'I mean it.'
'What was it that made you unwell?' Aubrey asked him.
'I guess I've just been really stressed lately' Haru answered.
'Stressed about what?'
Haru groaned then, reluctantly to answer.
'Those boys…no it's not that…' he shook his head. 'I'm grateful for everything you guys have done for me…but I feel under pressure.'
'Under pressure?' Aubrey repeated.
'I don't want to let you guys down' Haru mumbled, 'after everything…you've all done for me.'
Aubrey felt a stab in his heart then.
'You mean this is…my fault?'
'What?'
'Is this because I pressured you to take the lead role in the play? If it is I'm sorry, I didn't realise it was putting so much stress on you, you don't have to do it.'
'No' Haru cried, speaking louder than intended. He drew back then, putting his hand over his mouth. 'Sorry' he mumbled, 'I mean….' He lowered his hand, looking back up to Aubrey. 'It's really hard for me' Haru began, 'but I really want to do it. It's really nerve-wracking but I'm enjoying it, really.' His expression fell into a look of worry. 'You're not going to stop me doing it are you?'
'We're not going to make you do anything you don't want to' Aubrey told him seriously. 'If you want to keep doing the lead role……but please don't push yourself if it will make you ill.'
'It's ok' Haru smiled. 'I want to do it. I really do.'
Aubrey frowned at him, seemingly unconvinced.
'We should go' Sasha told him. 'We don't want to be late to class.'
'I don't care about class' Aubrey grumbled.

‘Well you should’ Sasha snapped at him. ‘You’ll never get anywhere in life if you don’t put effort into your lessons.’
‘School isn’t life’ Aubrey spoke sourly to her in response. ‘I really don’t care.’
Sasha turned away from him sharply with a tut.
She rose to her feet, speaking kindly now to Haru.
‘We’ll be back at lunch to see you’ she told him.
‘Oh no you don’t have to’ Haru waved at her with an awkward smile. ‘What about your practice…for the play?’
‘It can wait’ Sasha replied. ‘You’re our friend, we care about you.’
Haru sobbed into his hand suddenly on hearing that, unable to stop himself.
‘You’re all too kind’ he whispered through his tears.
‘Oh no, not again’ Sasha scolded him. ‘Stop crying all the time’ she said taking a tissue from the box beside the bed and dapping at his eyes.
She stopped then, staring into his eyes as he stared back at her.
She drew back away from him, offering him the box instead.
‘Here’ she said briskly, before turning away. ‘We’ll be back later. Come on Aubrey’ Sasha said to him as she sauntered out the room.
‘Bye’ Amelia and Ben said to him, before following after Sasha.
Aubrey lingered a moment longer, giving Haru a teasing smirk before turning away and leaving the room.
Haru let out a sigh, leaning back again in bed. He was sad to see them all go, especially Aubrey, whom he longed with all his heart to see again.

Sadly however, the next time Haru was visited, Aubrey was not there.
‘He’s been put into detention’ Sasha explained to him. ‘For bad behaviour’ she finished. ‘Again.’
‘Oh’ Haru grumbled unhappily. ‘I was hoping to see him.’
‘You’ll be able to see him again next time’ Amelia smiled.
‘Hopefully we won’t *have* to visit you here again’ Ben smiled at him. ‘Hopefully you’ll be able to leave here soon. How do you feel?’
‘I feel a lot better’ Haru smiled up at him. ‘I want to leave here, and start practicing again.’
Ben smiled back at him warmly.
‘You’ve not forgotten about the play hu?’ Sasha gleamed, leaning forward.
‘No of course not!’ Haru fumbled, ‘I uh....’ he laughed awkwardly then, averting his eyes and scratching the back of his head. ‘I really enjoyed being on stage, I uh...more than anything I want to...I want to be good enough. I want to.... more than anything I want to make myself a better person, I want to...I just wish I had more confidence, in myself I mean. I just...I want to do so much but uh.... I always think that I’m never good enough. I feel that there is so much that I want to do, but I always feel in my mind’ Haru clenched his jaw, eyes becoming distant, ‘I always doubt myself’ he finished in a whisper.
‘Oh Haru’ Sasha sighed, dropping heavily on the end of the bed. ‘You need to stop being so weak.’
‘I don’t mean to be’ Haru whimpered, hanging his head, ‘I .... I never wanted to be this way, I always wished I was stronger’ Haru swallowed.

‘Oh Haru I’m so sorry’ Sasha spoke hastily then, throwing her hands in the air. ‘I didn’t mean to upset, you I’m sorry if my words sound harsh....’
‘Oh no I....’ Haru spoke feebly.
Sasha moved closed towards Haru then as he sat up in bed, embracing him firmly, wrapping her arms around him. Haru fell quickly silent, blinking in surprise, eyes wide, frozen for a time.
His body relaxed, and he raised his arms, holding Sasha back lightly.
‘Stop being so hard on yourself’ Sasha told him, still embracing him. ‘We are your friends. We care about you. Don’t be so hard on yourself. Don’t be afraid to ask others for help, because we will always be here for you.’
Haru let out a sob, holding Sasha tightly now.
‘I’m sorry’ Haru gasped, ‘I....th-thank you.’
Sasha let go of him, pushing him back lightly and smiling at him.
She took a tissue from the box, wiping away his tears.
‘You’re hopeless’ she sighed, shaking her head at him, as Haru stared back at her with teary eyes.
Sasha tilted her head at him, her long purple hair falling about her shoulders.
‘We’ll be back here later’ Sasha said to him, as nearby Ben and Amelia watched silently. ‘And Aubrey will be with us next time.’
‘I don’t think there will be any need for that’ Haru waved away at her, having gathered himself now, ‘I uh.....I think I will be better soon. I just want to talk to the nurse and ask her permission to leave.’
‘Ok’ Sasha said giving a nod. ‘We look forward to seeing you again when you’re better, we can continue practicing the play again together.’
‘I....’ Haru breathed, ‘would like that.... very much.....I would like that very much.’
Sasha frowned at Haru in amusement.
‘You are so awkward at speaking’ she told him.
‘I am?’ Haru mumbled looking concerned.
‘Don’t worry about it’ Sasha said to him, rising to her feet. ‘Oh, and Amelia has brought something for you.’
Haru glanced around then, eyes wide as Amelia stepped forwards.
She held her hands out to him, handing him a single purple tulip in a tiny vase.
Haru stared at it in surprise for a few seconds, before gathering himself, realising he was expected to take it.
‘Oh’ Haru exclaimed, ‘oh my god... um....’ he took the vase from her, staring down at the flower. ‘Thank so you much. It’s beautiful.’
‘I like tulips’ Amelia answered sweetly, holding her hands behind her back. ‘I think they are the best flower, so pretty.’
‘That’s from both of us’ Ben spoke up then, and a confused silence followed.
The others stared at him. Finally, Sasha broke the silence, tutting and folding her arms.
‘Anyway’ she frowned, raising an eyebrow as she glanced towards Amelia, her expression softening a little. ‘We should get going. Get better soon’ she added, looking back at Haru with a playful and teasing expression. ‘You’ll be able to see Aubrey next time, then we can all be together again. Wouldn’t that be fun?’

‘Yeah’ Haru replied, feeling light at heart. ‘That....I would like that very much, I would love that.’
‘Ok let’s go!’ Sasha spoke, clapping her hands energetically then, ushering the others out the door. ‘Haru has to rest. And we gotta get to class.’
Ben and Amelia both protested feebly as they were shoved out of the room, Sasha turned one last time and waved back at Haru who stared at her with surprise.
‘Bye Haru! See you when you’re better! It better be soon!’ she sang playfully at him.
And with that she slammed the door, leaving Haru in silence.
Once he was alone, Haru began to laugh quietly to himself, smiling.
‘I’m so lucky to have found such kind people’ he said to himself, ‘and Aubrey especially so. He’s opened the world up for me. He’s helped me, and for that I am grateful.’

Chapter Six

The next day, Haru was allowed to leave the nurses office. He felt happy, feeling like himself again. He didn’t go to class, instead went straight to the drama hall, heading to his dormitory briefly to get his bag and some books beforehand.
It was deserted in the hall when he got there, and eerily silent.
Haru took one of the chairs from the stack at the edge of the hall, placing it close before the stage, and sat facing the stage.
He let out a sigh, sitting back in his chair and putting his bag on his lap. He intended to read one of the books he had brought with him, in order to pass the time, but then suddenly he heard a sound coming from backstage.
Haru froze, book still on his lap as he stared in alarm.
‘H-hello?’
He waited a few moments, gasping then as he saw Aubrey come from around the curtain, stepping out from backstage.
‘Oh my god hey!’ he cried out, smiling. ‘I didn’t expect to see you here. You’re feeling better then? I’m sorry I couldn’t come and see you.’
‘Oh no no’ Haru fumbled, closing his book and putting it away, back into his bag. ‘I feel much better thank you, and don’t worry I understand.... Sasha said you got in trouble with the teachers. I’m sorry about that.’
‘It’s not your fault’ Aubrey replied, stepping lightly offstage and moving over to him.
‘I’m sorry’ Haru replied awkwardly, putting his bag on the floor and rising to his feet, ‘I still feel like it’s my fault.’
‘Nah’ Aubrey waved him away with a smirk, ‘it’s my fault, I am a delinquent after all.’
Haru stared at him, giving him a strange look.
‘You’re very odd sometimes’ Haru said smiling weakly at him.
‘Am I? I’m sorry...I don’t mean to be...’
‘No, its fine’ Haru waved at him, hunching his shoulders. ‘I rather like it.’

‘You like it when I’m weird?’
‘Oh no you don’t have to say it like that!’ Haru panicked then. ‘I mean, you’re a really nice guy and uh....’ he averted his gaze, scratching the back of his head. ‘I just like it when you act like yourself you know?’
‘Are you blushing?’ Aubrey asked him then.
‘Oh no I’m not!’
‘Yeah you are’ Aubrey replied with a teasing smirk, leaning back with his hands in his pockets. ‘You look like a little strawberry. Hahaha!’
Haru flushed an even brighter red, hiding his face in his hands now, just wanting to cry.
‘Oh no don’t do that’ Aubrey frowned at him, reaching out to him. ‘I’m sorry I’m only teasing.... I know I shouldn’t.’
Haru gave a slight gasp as he felt Aubrey touch his wrists, moving to pull his hands away from his face.
‘There’ Aubrey smiled. ‘That’s better. I like to see your face.’
Haru stared back at him frozen, tears of anxiety in his eyes.
‘You cry too much’ Aubrey noted, letting go of him and allowing his hand to drop. ‘You really shouldn’t do that.’
‘I’m sorry’ Haru mumbled, staring at the floor. ‘I don’t mean to I...’
‘Its fine, you don’t need to explain yourself’ Aubrey interrupted him. ‘Anyway’ he said putting his hands back in his pockets. ‘What were you reading?’
‘Oh’ Haru started, ‘it’s um....’ he bent down, reaching to pick up the book from his open bag. ‘It’s another play’ he said showing Aubrey. ‘I thought I’d read more about plays since... you know, I just want to become better....at everything really.’
‘That’s cool’ Aubrey said, taking the book from Haru gently and staring at the cover. ‘*The Only Name*’ he read the title, ‘I know that one.’
‘You do?’ Haru gasped then, suddenly excited.
‘I don’t like it’ Aubrey gleamed.
‘....Oh.’
‘So, do you wanna do something fun to pass the time?’ Aubrey offered, handing the book back to him. ‘There are some board games in the cupboard. The others will be along a little later, but they’re still in their classes right now. What a bunch of loses right?’ Aubrey laughed.
‘Uh.....yeah’ Haru murmured.
‘Come come come’ Aubrey said enthusiastically to him them as he danced away. ‘Come on! Hurry hurry!’
‘I’m coming’ Haru blurted, stumbling after him as Aubrey made his way towards the corner of the hall.’
‘Look at all these sexy board games’ Aubrey declared, standing back after he had thrown the cupboard doors open. ‘This is gonna be totally awesome. We have to find something that will work as a two player only. How about hungry hungry hippo? Or how about a game of cards?’
‘Why don’t we read poems together?’ Haru suggested shyly.
‘What?’ Aubrey said in surprise, turning to him.
‘I’m sorry’ Haru spoke quickly then. ‘That’s a stupid idea...’

‘No no it isn’t’ Aubrey said closing the cupboard doors and turning to him. ‘If that’s what you want to do, let’s do that.... I don’t have any poems on me though.’
‘I... I do’ Haru said glancing back. ‘I have some books in my bag. The thing is I was just thinking.... that if you let me read to you, it might help me you know....’
‘You want to boost your confidence?’
‘Yes’ Haru spoke quickly. ‘I would like to lean to be more confident. I was thinking that if you let me read a poem to you...then it would help me.’
‘I would love that’ Aubrey clapped. ‘That would be so super cool!’
‘Do you really think so?’
‘Of course,’ Aubrey gleamed. ‘You need to work on your confidence a little more.’
‘I know’ Haru spoke in barely a whisper, glancing away shyly.
‘And you cry a lot. I should get into the habit of carrying tissues on me just for you’ Aubrey winked. ‘Oh wait, I already do.’
‘Hu?’
‘It’s ok’ Aubrey chuckled. ‘I’m only teasing, but not really. Come on’ he said, moving away and ushering Haru to follow him. ‘I’ll listen to you read.’
They moved back to the front of the hall before the stage. Aubrey sat on the edge of the stage, watching Haru as he knelt before his bag, reaching into it and pulling out one of the books he had brought with him.
‘Here’ Haru mumbled then, rising and moving towards Aubrey.
‘Sit next to me’ Aubrey offered, patting the empty spot beside him happily.
‘Um....ok.’
Haru sat beside Aubrey, maintaining a short space between them, and as Haru glanced tentatively around at Aubrey, he saw him grinning confidently back at him.
Aubrey was completely relaxed.
He’s always so calm Haru thought to himself as he quickly looked away. *How, how does he do it? If only I could be like that...*
‘So, are you going to read then or not?’ Aubrey said.
‘Oh!’ Haru caught himself. ‘I’m sorry yes...’
Haru began to flick through the pages hastily, ‘I um.....uh.....’
‘Just pick anyone’ Aubrey offered. ‘I don’t mind hearing any.’
‘Ok cool’ Haru spoke to his book, not daring to look up. ‘Uh....’
His heart began to rise in his throat, and his stomach flipped over several times.
‘Uhhhhh....’
‘You don’t know which one to pick?’ Aubrey said.
‘I don’t know’ Haru mumbled, turning the pages.
‘How about that one?’ Aubrey offered, sticking his finger out and stopping him on one of the pages at random.
Haru looked at the poem.
‘I could read that one’ he said, the edges of his lips twitching nervously. ‘Um...ok I’m going to do it.’
Aubrey continued to stare at him, waiting for him to read. But something happened in Haru’s mind, and he became suddenly stuck.

‘It’s ok’ Aubrey said to him. ‘You don’t have to get nervous around me, just read when you’re ready. Go on, pretend like I’m not here.’
‘Ha’ Haru chuckled awkwardly, clutching the book a little tighter in his hands and not tearing his eyes away from it. ‘I....I got this....’
Ok he thought in his mind, closing his eyes tightly then. *I got this*.
He opened his eyes, letting out a breath and forcing his body to relax.
He began to read.

‘Sister of the earliest light,
Type of loveliness in sorrow,
Silver mists thy radiance borrow,
Even as they cross thy sight.
When thou comest to the sky,
In their dusky hollows waken,
Spirits that are sad, forsaken,
Birds that shun the day, and I’

Haru clenched his teeth, feeling his throat begin to tighten.
Beside him Aubrey continued to watch silently.
‘Are you alright?’ Aubrey asked quietly.
‘Yes’ Haru whispered, trying to control himself. ‘I got this...’
He let out another breath, forcing himself to continue before he could stop himself. He didn’t want to get caught up in his anxiety. He didn’t want to let it drown him again.

‘Looking downward far and wide,
Hidden things thou dost discover.
Luna! help a hapless lover,
Lift him kindly to thy side!
Aided by thy friendly beams,
Let him through the lattice peeping,
Look into the room where, sleeping,
Lies the maiden of his dreams.’

He paused at the end of this, glancing towards Aubrey. He felt a little calmer, though his heart still beat painfully in his chest.
Aubrey this time did not speak, and Haru continued again, continuing with his momentum.

‘Ah, I see her! Now I gaze,
Bending in a trance Elysian,
And I strain my inmost vision,
And I gather all thy rays.
Bright and brighter yet I see
Charms no envious robes encumber;

And she draws me to her slumber
As Endymion once drew thee.'

Haru let out a heavy sigh now, hanging his head, shoulders slumped.
He closed the book, feeling drained.
'That was beautiful' Aubrey spoke then, breaking Haru's trance. 'Yeeeey...' he began to clap his hands playfully then, smiling at Haru. 'Relax' he said lowering his hands as he noticed Haru's expression. 'I'm not making fun of you I swear.'
'Oh good' Haru said turning away, relieved. 'So, um.... you really did like it?'
'I did.' Aubrey faced ahead. 'You read very well.'
'You really think so?'
'You could be better.'
'Oh.'
'Hey its ok' Aubrey smiled at him confidently. 'You can still improve.'
'I want to improve' Haru said to him. 'I want to, I want to be better in so many things...'
'Sandwich?' Aubrey offered then.
'What?'
'I got food?'
'That was… random.'
'Is it?' Aubrey said, shuffling away and crawling across the stage. 'I brought food today in case I got hungry' Aubrey explained as he moved backstage. 'I brought a lot of food, in case the others are hungry. They should be here soon.'
Aubrey returned to Haru's side, sitting back beside him and handing him a sandwich.
'You're not fussy, are you?' Aubrey said to him, handing him a sandwich with prawns in.
'Oh no' Haru said taking it. 'I mean, I mean I'm fine. I mean.... I am not a picky eater.'
Haru began to feel a little awkward again, angry at himself for fumbling so often, but he felt nervous sitting so close to Aubrey, but Aubrey was completely relaxed, eating his own sandwich happily.
'What do you have?' Haru mumbled.
'Pickle' Aubrey grinned.
'You like pickle?' Haru asked him.
'You don't?'
'Its fine I guess.'
Haru looked away then, beginning to eat meticulously.
'I like moments like these' Aubrey spoke suddenly, breaking the silence.
'Moments like what?'
'It's just peaceful' Aubrey said. 'I like hanging out with friends and all that. I get tired of the teachers and lessons.... whatever' he grumbled, continuing to eat. 'The others should be here soon. Lessons would have finished by now' he said. 'Then we can continue working on the play. Wouldn't you like that?'
'Yes, I would' Haru said. 'I think that would be really nice.'
'You think you can handle it?'
Haru turned to Aubrey.

‘Hu?
‘Do you think you will be ok on stage? Last time you collapsed.’
‘I’ll be fine’ Haru spoke unconvincingly. ‘I promise.’
They sat in silence for a short time, continuing to eat their sandwiches.
When Aubrey was finished his, he leant back, resting on his back on the floor of the stage, arm over his eyes as he sighed tiredly.
‘I hate this’ he groaned. ‘It’s so boring...’
‘What’s wrong?’ Haru asked him.
‘Nah, I’m just bored.’
Haru watched him for a short time, before facing ahead again. He glanced up as the doors to the hall opened, and Sasha, Ben and Amelia entered.
Aubrey sat up quickly, his expression breaking into a smile as he saw them approaching.
‘Oh, thank god you’re finally here’ Aubrey exclaimed. ‘What took you so long?’
‘We were in class’ Sasha said, glaring at him. ‘I’m guessing you weren’t?’
‘The hell I was’ Aubrey spoke sharply back. ‘Class is so *boring!*’
‘It might be more interesting if you actually paid attention’ Ben said to him, as they slowed to a stop before the stage.
Amelia glanced towards Haru then, smiling sweetly.
‘Hey Haru.’
‘Hey Amelia’ Haru smiled back.
Sasha glanced at Haru briefly before looking back to Aubrey.
‘You’re going to get expelled if you carry on like this’ Sasha warned him.
Aubrey only shrugged at that.
‘Do you want to go back home?' Sasha asked him sharply.
‘Hell no’ Aubrey replied sourly. ‘Are you kidding me?’
‘I think you should stop skipping out on class’ Ben told him seriously.
‘But why?’ Aubrey replied.
‘Because I’m sure that none of us would want to see you expelled’ Ben told him. ‘We would miss you if you suddenly vanished.’
‘I wouldn’t’ Sasha answered quickly.
‘Oh, now Sasha don’t say that’ Amelia worried, ‘you don’t really mean it.’
Haru watched them silently, feeling amused. He found them all so funny, though they didn’t mean to be.
‘Would any of you guys like a sandwich?’ Aubrey offered, ‘Haru and I already had ours.... oh...’ Aubrey said, seeing Haru was still eating. ‘Well I’ve had mine.’
‘We can have a quick bite to eat’ Sasha smiled excitedly. ‘Then I would love to just start practicing the play.’
‘I’m not that hungry’ Ben waved her away. ‘I’ll help Aubrey get some of the props out, which scene are we working on?’
‘We’ll decide over a sandwich’ Sasha said to him. ‘Aubrey, where are they?’
‘They’re in my bag.’

A short while later, and Aubrey and Ben were shifting boxes backstage, just behind the curtains. They rummaged through the boxes, looking for costumes and props.

Sitting on the edge of the stage, Haru and Sasha and Amelia sat peacefully, talking together happily.
‘So how about this bit?’ Sasha spoke, pointing to a section in the book, the script from the play they were practicing. ‘This is the part the main character confesses his feelings for the young girl’ she said to the others. ‘Haru’ she glanced up at him, ‘are you confident to play this? Do you still want to be the main character in this story?’
‘Yes, I do’ Haru spoke. ‘I really want to do this, I feel like it would help me a lot.’
‘That’s awesome’ Sasha said cheerily. ‘I’m so excited.’
‘So, who is going to play the girl?’ Amelia asked.
‘We could flip a coin?’ Sasha suggested, leaning forward and winking at Amelia. ‘It’s gotta be one of us.’
‘Oh really?’ Amelia said, blushing slightly now.
Sasha began to laugh at that. ‘I got a penny in my pocket’ she said, reaching for it. ‘Are you ready?’ she asked Haru.
Haru could not answer, only stare back at Sasha with wide eyes.
‘Are you ready to start yet?’ Aubrey called out to the small group.
‘Yeah’ Sasha called back.
‘We found the dress’ Ben told them, holding up a loose-fitting purple dress.
‘Oh, I love that one’ Amelia said beginning to clap her hands then. ‘We’ve used that dress before in a play’ she explained to Haru as he looked back at her. ‘I love it so much.’
‘Well you have a fifty-fifty chance of wearing it again’ Sasha said to Amelia with a grin. ‘Are you ready?’ she asked Amelia.
Amelia gave an eager nod.
‘Ready?’ Sasha said to Haru again.
Haru stared at Sasha nervously, swallowing the lump in his throat and giving a nod.
‘Here we go’ Sasha said, throwing the coin up in the air and catching it again. She placed it on the back of her hand, covering it. ‘Heads or tails’ she said to Haru.
‘Uh....’
‘I’ll be tails’ Amelia said.
‘Then I’m heads’ Sasha breathed. ‘Call it’ she said glancing to Haru as she revealed the coin to him.
‘I... uh.... heads.’
Sasha’s eyes shone with excitement and anticipation, and she looked down, taking her hand away.
They all looked down at the coin. It was indeed heads.
‘Yey’ Sasha laughed then. ‘Looks like the dress is mine.’
Ben held it out, and Haru turned, seeing the dress clearer now.
It looked beautiful.
‘Too bad’ Amelia sighed forlorn as she tilted her head towards the dress. ‘I would have looked good in purple.’

A short time later, and Sasha had put on the dress. It was loose fitting, but looked beautiful on her, a pale purple in colour.

‘You look wonderful’ Amelia breathed, holding her hands over her heart. ‘Wait...there’s something missing.’
Amelia went over to her bag, kneeling before it, and taking out a little cylindrical plastic container. Inside the container, there was a little purple flower make of delicate plastic, though it looked almost real. It was a tulip.
‘I like tulips’ Amelia spoke, taking it from is container and approaching Sasha, placing the plastic flower in her hair delicately. ‘There’ she said stepping back, ‘that’s much better.’
Sasha bowed her head then, touching the flower in her hair lightly. ‘Thank you’ Sasha gleamed.
Amelia smiled sweetly back, glancing over Sasha’s shoulder then at Haru.
‘You look great’ Amelia said to him.
Sasha turned to see Haru, who wore a waistcoat now, and a gentleman’s hat.
Nearby Aubrey glanced to each of them, a smile upon his face.
‘Are we ready to begin?’ Ben asked them both.
Sasha tilted her head towards Haru, a sly expression on her face.
‘I’m ready.’
Haru stared back at her with wide eyes, feeling suddenly terrified.
I can do this Haru thought to himself. *I can do this.*
Haru tensed slightly, startled by the sudden sound of a thing being dragged. He glanced around, seeing Aubrey dragging towards the centre of the stage, a small bench he had found backstage.
Sasha, bold and confident as she usually was, strode forwards then, twirling once before sitting on the bench.
‘We start from page thirty-five?’ she asked.
Haru stared at her for a moment before remembering himself.
‘Ah...yeah’ he fumbled, glancing down at the book in his hand, ‘um....’
Sasha did not have her book with her. Her copy was left on the floor nearby.
‘You’re not reading from your book?’ Haru asked her.
‘No’ she shook her head. ‘I know it off by heart.’
‘You do?’
‘Yeah’ she beamed at him. ‘I’ve been reading it like crazy. We know which play we are doing now, and I have memorised nearly all of it now.’
‘That’s incredible’ Haru breathed.
‘Are you going to talk all day?’ Aubrey asked them with a frown, standing there with his arms folded. ‘Break isn’t long enough to practice as much as we would like.’
‘Don’t be impatient’ Sasha hissed at him.
‘No, he’s right’ Haru fumbled. ‘I got this.’
Ben and Amelia moved away, going to stand at the front of the stage side by side, as Aubrey moved towards the edge of the stage.
Sasha indicated to the empty spot beside her on the bench, and Haru moved over to it, sitting awkwardly, maintaining a short space between them.
He leant forwards, resting his elbows on his knees.
‘You said you wanted to speak to me’ Sasha spoke to him softly.

Haru glanced towards her, before looking away again, glancing at the page of the open book in his hand.
‘I had to see you’ Haru answered. ‘I couldn’t be away from you much longer.’
‘Why?’
‘My life is falling apart, my world all around me, and you’re all that’s left.’
‘You shouldn’t let yourself become a victim.’
‘I don’t want to be’ Haru said, not taking his eyes off the page, ‘I feel there is no option left to me, but to make a new start.’
Sasha stared at Haru for a time, not speaking.
‘You are all that I want’ Haru continued after a few moments. ‘I want to create a new life with you, to move forward, I don’t want to be hurt by my past anymore. I don’t want to look at my feet anymore, I want to look at the stars.’
Haru glanced down at the script again, seeing the word [pause] written there.
Haru glanced towards Sasha again.
‘I want you in my life’ Haru told her, ‘I never want to lose you again.’
Haru tensed suddenly, feeling a strong wind behind him.
Aubrey had appeared behind them then with a large sheet, waving it at them to create a breeze.
‘Wooooooooooosssssshhhhhhh’ Aubrey said.
Sasha turned to him, gritting her teeth in anger.
Ben appeared behind Aubrey quickly, grabbing him by the collar and dragging him back and off the stage again.
Sasha turned away from him, returning her attention back to Haru.
Haru caught himself, glancing back down to the script.
‘I believe that we can do this’ Haru spoke with sincerity, ‘no matter what bad happens in the world’ he said, ‘we will always have each other.’
Before them Amelia clasped her hands together as she listened, watching the pair as they continued to rehearse, while ignoring Aubrey and Ben who had begun to wrestle offstage.

Chapter Seven

Afterwards, Haru felt exhausted.
The five of them sat around the bench on the stage, continuing to eat the food that Aubrey had brought.
Sasha still wore the purple dress, the little purple tulip still in her hair. She ate her food ungracefully.
‘Could you make any more mess?’ Aubrey asked her casually.
‘Could you just shut your face?’ Sasha snapped quickly.

‘Oh no please don’t fight’ Amelia worried.
‘Will you two just knock it off’ Ben groaned, speaking to Sasha and Aubrey. ‘I’m too tired for this.’
‘Lessons are going to start soon’ Amelia grumbled, glancing at her watch, ‘we don’t have much time left.’
‘That’s too bad’ Aubrey replied, speaking in a teasing manner.
‘Are you even going to turn up to your next class?’ Ben asked Aubrey, as Haru who sat on the bench, watched them silently.
‘Meah.’
‘Oh, come on Aubrey’ Amelia frowned at him.
‘Alright alright’ Aubrey waved. ‘I’ll be there.’
‘You’re pushing your luck’ Ben warned him.
‘Yeah I know’ Aubrey grumbled.
Haru glanced down at his lap, balling his fists and clenching his teeth. He blinked several times, to try to keep the tears away, hoping no one would notice.
‘How are your drawings coming along?’ Aubrey said to Sasha then.
‘Fine’ Sasha replied sounding sullen.
‘Your drawings are always so cool’ Aubrey sighed, leaning forwards and resting his chin on his palm. ‘Maybe one day you could draw me for some practice. Could you do that? Draw me like one of your French girls Jack?’
Sasha jerked her head towards him, looking utterly livid.
‘It’s ok just ignore him’ Amelia said trying to calm her.
‘You like to draw?’ Haru voiced, speaking before he could stop himself.
‘I do’ Sasha replied, turning away from Aubrey at that moment. ‘I’m not actually that bad’ she winked.
‘I love art’ Haru spoke in a feeble voice barely audible. ‘I... love all things creative.’
‘Don’t say that Sasha’ Amelia frowned at her, ‘your art is incredible.’
‘I wouldn’t say incredible’ Sasha raised an eyebrow.
Amelia just smiled at her, before looking back at Haru.
‘So, you like art as well?’ she said to Haru, as beside her, Aubrey began to poke Ben’s cheek with his finger.
‘Dude, stop touching me.’
‘I do like art’ Haru replied, ‘though I uh...I don’t really um.... I don’t....’
‘Do you draw at all?’ Aubrey asked, having finally left Ben alone now.
‘Not really. I mean.... I do yes but.... not very often. I rarely but...I enjoy it.’
Haru’s left hand twitched involuntarily then, and he smiled weakly to himself, feeling a longing in his heart.
No one seemed to notice the movement.
‘You know what?’ Aubrey spoke up suddenly, pointing at Haru. ‘You and Sasha look like a couple.’
Haru gasped in shock at that as beside him Sasha spluttered in outrage, Amelia had a hand over her mouth in disbelief.
‘Aubrey you idiot’ Ben groaned wearily.
‘What?’ he shrugged carelessly. ‘Don’t say you weren’t thinking it too.’

Ben only grimaced, turning away then.
‘So, you have a girlfriend?’ Aubrey asked Haru then.
‘Me? N-no!’
‘Are you sure?’ Aubrey teased. ‘It would be a waste if you were single.’
‘What?’ Haru blushed furiously.
‘Aubrey, shut your face and stop teasing the poor boy’ Sasha said, leaning forwards on her elbows.
‘I think you’re protesting too much’ Aubrey said to Haru. ‘Are you sure you’re not hiding a girl on the side?’
‘That’s enough’ Ben sighed at him. ‘Just because you’ve had a girlfriend before.’
‘You have?’ Haru uttered nervously, glancing up and trying to force his voice not to waver, his expression to remain casual. But his heart was tightening in his chest.
‘Yeah a few’ Aubrey replied offhandedly. ‘Nothing serious’ he added with a laugh, ‘I can’t get them to stay! Hahaha!’
‘Oh, I see’ Haru forced a smile. ‘You like girls then?’
‘Uh, yeah’ Aubrey said as if it were obvious. ‘Don’t you?’
‘I’ve never had a girlfriend before’ Haru admitted a little bashfully. ‘I’m just….so awkward around people.’
‘Yeah, I know’ Aubrey frowned with amusement, leaning on his knee and resting a chin against his palm. ‘There’s no rush’ Aubrey told him. ‘Find someone you want, someone who takes your heart, and build a relationship slowly, one that has meaning. My relationships were passionate and we were both crazy about each other in the beginning, but they all burned out fast.’
‘Oh, I see’ Haru mumbled again. ‘So, um….’ He hunched his shoulders then, balling his fists in his lap. ‘Have you ever um……made love?’
Haru bowed his head, his grey hair covering his eyes.
Aubrey turned to him, watching him closely.
‘You want to know if I took any of the girls to bed?’ he asked him.
Haru flushed brightly, gritting his teeth, the edges of his eyes crinkling nervously.
Aubrey let out a sigh, turning away again.
‘I uh…. I did’ he said. ‘They were crazy’ he laughed.
Haru dared to raise his head, looking over at Aubrey, wanting to say more but not knowing what.
The others watched silently, Ben and Amelia and Sasha. They all felt suddenly like they should keep silent now, some shared instinct, and so they just listened.
‘Did you…. ever love any of them’ Haru asked after at time.
‘What’s all this coming from?’ Aubrey laughed then, becoming serious. ‘Why are you asking me these questions, you’re not falling for me are you?’
‘I…n-no’ Haru fumbled.
‘Haha’ Aubrey laughed then, slapping him roughly on the back. ‘That’s great’ he said jovially. ‘You know I don’t sit that side of the fence. Now come on’ he said rising to his feet.
‘We’ve got a show to practice’ Aubrey said.
‘We don’t have time you fool’ Sasha voiced then. ‘We gotta go, class is starting in a few minutes.’

Aubrey just stood there silently, but the disappointment on his face was clear for everyone to see.

They parted ways after that, each going to their own class. Amelia and Sasha however were in the same class, and often spent most of their days together.
When the last class had finished, Amelia realised she has forgotten one of her books.
'I think I must have left it in the drama hall' she said, rummaging through her bag not finding it.
'You clumsy idiot' Sasha laughed at her.
'I'll be back' Amelia said, straightening up and hoisting the bag over her shoulder.
'I'll see you later then' Sasha called out to her as she skipped away.
'Bye' Amelia waved back, before turning and making her way off.
She made her way quickly across the grounds, entering the building where the drama hall was.
She entered the hall, jumping lightly onto the stage where the bench still sat in the centre. Amelia bent down to pick up the book, pausing suddenly when she heard a sound.
It sounded like crying.
'…...Haru?' she whispered.
She turned, moving backstage and stepping carefully around the curtain, seeing in the dim room, Haru sitting on the floor, hugging his knees to him as he leant back against the wall, crying into his arms, his sobs muffled.
Amelia approached him slowly, reaching out to touch his shoulder gently.
Haru raised his head, looking up at her with eyes red and skin blotchy.
She slowly knelt beside him.
'Oh Haru' she spoke softly, handing him another tissue. 'We're going to run out of these soon.'
'Sorry' Haru whimpered pathetically. 'I know it's stupid of me…. I'm stupid…. I can't help it.'
'You're not stupid.'
'Yes I am.'
'No Haru. You're not.'
Amelia frowned at him, taking a seat beside him.
'What's brought this on all of a sudden? Was someone picking on you again?'
'No no....nothing like that....'
'Then what?'
Haru looked over at her, his eyes still teary.
He gritted his teeth, turning away sharply, annoyed at himself.
'I'm so stupid.'
'Tell me what's wrong' Amelia spoke gently.
'You can't help who you fall in love with.'
Amelia blinked in shock at that, staring at Haru for a moment.
'You're in love with Aubrey aren't you?'
Haru gasped, frozen then. He bowed his head, continuing to cry into his hands.

‘Dammit am I that obvious? I hope the others don’t know too. I’m so stupid. I never cared for anyone but when I first saw him perform on stage.....ah… he was so confident...and that’s when I.....my heart I.....oh god....’
He grasped his hair tightly, nails digging into his scalp.
‘I hate myself sometimes. I’m always so weak, so pathetic. And Aubrey is so confident and strong. I want more than anything to be him. But more than that...I want *him*.... I want...him to care about me....to love me but.... he only likes girls.’
Haru blurted out the last part, unable to stop himself and he dissolved into hysterical tears.
‘Oh Haru’ Amelia sighed miserably.
Amelia hesitated for a moment, before continuing.
‘Do you want to hear a secret of mine?’ she said teasingly then.
‘A secret?’ Haru mumbled, dabbing at his eyes with the tissue.
‘Yeah.’ Amelia shuffled up to him then, resting her chin on her knees and tilting her head at Haru teasingly.
‘W-what secret?’
‘Sasha and I are lovers.’
‘What?’ Haru breathed.
‘I know’ Amelia whispered excitedly. ‘You would never have guessed. We keep our relationship an absolute secret. She would kill me if she knew I had told you…well…. maybe not you. She trusts you.’
‘She does?’
‘Mmhm.’
Haru blinked at her tentatively.
‘So, um…you mean to say that…you and Sasha are um…. lesbians?’
Amelia smiled at his awkwardness.
‘Yeah’ she whispered happily. ‘We do all the things a regular couple do.’
‘You do?’
‘Yeah. We kiss and stuff, we…make love.’
‘Really?’ Haru breathed, eyes beginning to shimmer.
‘Yes, but you must *tell no one*’ Amelia said, putting a finger to her lips. ‘You must keep this an absolute secret, do you understand?
‘Y-yes’ Haru fumbled. ‘I would never tell anyone. I swear.’
‘I know’ Amelia smiled. ‘I trust you.’
Haru smiled at her briefly, before turning away again, looking sad.
‘I know what it feels like to be different’ Amelia said to him. ‘I know what it feels like to be an outcast, to have the world not accept you. My family they.... don’t like what I am. They....’ she laughed then. ‘It’s been tough, but Sasha, I love more than anything else in the world. You shouldn’t care what people think. But uh.... I’m kinda being a hypocrite here but, we keep our love a secret for fear of what the world would say. Though I know it’s wrong to keep silent about it.’ She frowned to herself then, bowing her head. ‘I love Sasha more than anything, and I feel sad that we have to keep our love a secret, but my family....’ Amelia shook her head then. ‘It doesn’t matter, it’s all going to be ok in the end. I know it is.’
Haru stared at her wide eyed, before turning away again.
‘I....had no idea.’

‘That was the point.’
‘What should I do?’ he whined. ‘I…. I can’t tell Aubrey how I fell I…um…he……already said that he didn’t…doesn’t like boys.’
‘Maybe if you tell him he would feel different?’ Amelia shrugged.
Haru hunched his shoulders, hugging his knees closer to his chest.
‘I want you and Aubrey to be together’ Amelia said to him, ‘that would be so cool. Live a happy life, tell him how you feel and be happy with him, even if he doesn’t feel the same, you should let him know at the very least. Don’t live with regret.’
‘I…. I don’t want to force any expectation on him. Mmmm’ Haru groaned. ‘I really do like him, I have done for a while now and…I……. don’t know what to do about it.’
He stared off into nothingness for a moment, his eyes glazed over.
‘The truth is’ Haru said to Amelia, ‘I was kind of jealous of you when I saw you kiss him before.’
Amelia chuckled lightly at that, her smile a friendly one.
‘Oh, you don’t need to worry about anything’ she told him. ‘We have no interest in each other, not in that way anyway. It’s all for the show.’

Haru went to his dormitory shortly after that. The day was growing late, and Haru was feeling tired.
He trudged up the stairs, heading slowly down the corridor towards his room, carrying his bag over his shoulder.
When he opened his door, he was surprised to see Nate there.
‘Oh...hey’ Haru said, catching himself then. He had completely forgotten about Nate. ‘How are you doing?’
Nate had been lying back on his bed, reading a book.
‘Hey Haru.’
Haru closed the door.
‘You alright?’ Nate asked, as Haru made his way to his own bed.
‘Uh...yeah’ Haru said, putting his bag down on the floor, ‘I’m good.’
He watched Nate, but Nate had turned his attention back to his book, falling silent.
Haru watched him for a few moment, before catching himself, realising he staring. He looked away quickly, turning towards the window.
He furrowed his brow, seeing something outside then.
Haru leant closer to the window, seeing a pale figure outside. It appeared to be a girl.
Haru watched this figure for a few seconds, before the figure turned away, disappearing into the cover of the trees. Haru blinked in confusion.
‘Are you alright?’ Nate asked him then, looking around.
‘Uh....yeah’ Haru mumbled. ‘I um.... I think I’m going to go to bed. I’m feeling a little tired.’
‘Ok.’
Haru dressed quickly, changing into his pyjamas, he brushed his teeth quickly before getting into the bed.
He lay on his side for a moment, before reaching into his bag and taking out his book.

He began to read the script for the play, thinking about Sasha, who was able to read the script from heart so beautifully.
I want to do that Haru thought to himself. *Sasha was so amazing.*
And as he lay on the bed, he thought of Amelia also, and what she had told him.
'I want you and Aubrey to be together, that would be so cool. Live a happy life. Don't live with regret.'
Haru hunched his shoulders slightly, gritting his teeth. He continued to read the script, the tiredness washing over him.
He fell asleep with the book by his side, resting peacefully.
He woke the next morning, his alarm sounding.
Haru sat up, rubbing his eyes. The book he had been reading fell off the edge of the bed and onto the floor.
Haru instantly glanced out of the window, the room was bright now, the morning sunlight shining in. Haru's eyes roved over the grounds, wondering if he would see the strange girl dressed in pale clothes again. But the grounds where empty.
The bed opposite him was empty. Nate was already gone, his bed was made, and Haru was alone.

Haru went to his first class, and everything was normal. During his lunchbreak, Haru went to the library, wanting to read his book in a quiet environment.
It was Wednesday, and they were not gathering at the drama hall this lunchtime, because of Amelia having her music lesson, which happened on Thursdays also.
And so Haru decided to continue reading the script of the play. He would have sat outside, but it was cold on this day.
Haru had just reached the top of the stairs, glancing about. The door to the library was further down the hall. Haru clutched the strap of the bag tighter, grimacing then before taking a step forward.
He paused, pulling back suddenly as he saw a figure step out from around the corner, talking to his friends that followed him.
It was Kyle.
Haru froze where he stood, unable to move, his mind suddenly becoming foggy.
Kyle looked ahead then, suddenly spotting Haru.
'Oh' he said, a slow smile spreading across his face. 'It's you.'
Haru gritted his teeth, eyes growing wider.
'What are you doing here?' Kyle spoke in a very unfriendly and hostile manner.
Haru's breath caught in his throat as Kyle took another step towards him, as did his friends.
'Why are you even here?' Kyle said, walking around Haru, making a full circle around him before stopping before him again. 'You're just stupid.'
'Wh-why would you say that?' Haru fumbled back, shoulders hunched and body tense.
'Wh-wh-wh-wh-hahaha' Kyle took a step back, laughing at him. 'Why do you talk like that? Fucking idiot.'
'Why don't you just leave me alone?' Haru snapped, forcing himself to speak.
Kyle began to laugh, reaching out to Haru and flicking his ear.

Haru smacked his hand away, glaring at him now.
'Am I scaring you little rabbit?' Kyle laughed, as his friends stood behind him watching silently.
They were all amused by this, staring at Haru with a disturbing sort of hunger, like he was prey being teased and played with before being hurt.
'Why do you cry all the time?' Kyle sniggered.
'I'm not crying!'
'You're so weak it's hilarious.'
'N-no I'm not!' Haru glared at Kyle, blinking rapidly the tears from his eyes.
He began to back away, and as soon as he did, the others, Kyle and all of his friends, advanced on him, which made Haru even more afraid.
'I'm just trying to mind my own business' Haru fumbled, 'I...' suddenly his foot slipped as he stumbled back, having reached the top of the stairs and having not realised.
Kyle's hand shot out automatically to catch him, grabbing Haru by the front of his shirt.
Haru stared back at him in shock, eyes wide and terrified as he held Kyle's wrist with both hands as Kyle grasped the front of his shirt.
And then Kyle smiled, shoving Haru back sharply and letting go of him.
Haru fell backwards down the flight of stairs.

Chapter Eight

Haru fell hard, tumbling backwards down the stairs and smacking his head against the wall.
Haru clutched his arm to his chest, having hit it as he fell down, landing awkwardly. He tried to prop himself up, mind trying to collect itself and process what had just happened, when a figure rushed past him.
Haru glanced up to see Sasha tearing up the stairs towards Kyle.
Kyle stepped back in surprise as she lunged towards him, swinging her leg and kicking him hard in the groin without hesitation.
Kyle instantly fell to his knees, body hunched over in pain as his friends turns on Sasha.
At the bottom of the stairs, Haru stared upwards, as Sasha and the other boys began to fight.
She was outnumbered, but as Haru watched, he was unable to think, his eyes glazed over as Sasha was shoved backwards.
Sasha stumbled, fighting at the top of the stairs. She was relentless in her attack, lashing out at the boys. But she was no match for them. One of them slapped her hard, grabbing her by the hair and jerking her back. She swung at the guy who held her, aiming for his eye and cutting him with her nails.
He cried out, letting her go.
Instead of continuing to attack her, the others remaining turned to their friend, seeing that he was hurt.
'Are you done yet you worthless scum?!' Sasha snarled fearlessly.

One of the friends glared at her, turning towards her to approach, but Kyle called out to them then.
'Stop! Enough!'
People were beginning to gather in the corridor now, having heard the commotion, many had stepped out into the hallway to see what was going on.
'Leave the bitch' Kyle groaned, rising to his feet. 'I'll kick your ass next time' Kyle said to her, straightening.
'Real brave of you to hit a girl' Sasha snarled.
'You're not like a normal girl' Kyle spoke dangerously, 'you attacked us first.'
'You attacked *him'* Sasha said, pointing at Haru who still sat at the bottom of the stairs where he had fallen. 'You're a bunch of cowards who pick on those weaker than you. You're all tough in a group, I'll still fight your ass.'
Kyle said no more, turning and walking away, his friends followed after him.
The corridor was filled with people, even more now than before.
Sasha glared at the group of boys, turning away only when they were out of sight.
She hurried down the stairs, back to where Haru was.
'Are you alright?' she asked hastily.
Haru glanced up at her, eyes wide.
'Can you stand?' Sasha asked, reaching a hand out to him.
Haru raised his hand, taking Sasha's in his own, and she helped him to a stand.
'Let's go somewhere else' Sasha spoke to him quickly. 'It's too crowded here.'

The pair left the building, walking side by side through the grounds of the boarding school.
Haru glanced away then, towards the large fences that ran around the school. At times this place felt like a prison to him, and he felt trapped here, wishing sometimes that he could leave. But he had begun to believe that he was making friends. And for that, it was worth staying.
They walked in silence at a quickened pace for a short time, until they were far away from the buildings, and any other people. They had wandered out into the open field, and no one else was around them.
Finally, Sasha had slowed in her pace, walking leisurely now, Haru had struggled to keep up with her.
'I'm sorry about that' Sasha voiced, laughing then to cover her annoyance.
'It's not your fault' Haru replied sounding uncomfortable, 'You don't have to apologise.'
'I'm just so mad at those jerks' Sasha growled under her breath, glaring back towards the buildings behind them.
She let out a sigh, forcing herself to be calm.
'Are you ok?' Sasha said to him. 'I hope they didn't hurt you?'
'Oh no I feel fine' Haru spoke hastily.
Sasha stared at Haru unconvinced, frowning with displeasure.
'P-please don't look at me like that' Haru mumbled, hunching his shoulders and glancing away.
'Do you want to go to the nurse's office?' Sasha spoke tenderly.

‘No, I feel fine. I swear’
Sasha reached out to him, touching him at the back of the head, Haru flinched as she did this.
‘You’ve got a bump on the back of your head.’
‘I do?’ Haru said, touching his head tentatively. ‘Oh I....I didn’t realise.’
Haru lowered his hand then, smiling back at Sasha.
‘Um....thanks for coming to help me. You didn’t have to do that.’
‘Of course I did. You’re my friend.’
Haru stared at her frozen for a moment wide-eyed. He then began to sob into his hands.
He did not see the tissue Sasha offered him, not until she tapped his shoulder.
Haru glanced up, barely able to see through the tears.
‘Oh...’ he whimpered, ‘thanks.’ He started laughing then at himself. ‘I’m sorry I’m just...I’m just so grateful.’
Sasha tutted at him, rolling her eyes as he took the tissue from her, wiping away his tears.
‘You’re hopeless you know that?’ she said to him, frowning and folding her arms.
‘I don’t mean to be.’
‘It’s quite pathetic really’ Sasha spoke loudly, turning away and lifting her chin. ‘Having a *girl* come to your rescue.’
‘Hu?’
‘Relax’ she said turning back to him. ‘I’m just teasing you.’
‘O-oh’ Haru said awkwardly. ‘I um.... ha’ he smiled. ‘You sounded kinda like Aubrey then. He um.... likes to tease me too.’
‘If he’s picking on you just tell me’ Sasha said grabbing the air with her fist and speaking suddenly with anger. ‘I’ll be more than happy to kick him in the balls!’
Haru hid his laughter behind his hand now, unable to hold back his sniggers.
‘I’m sorry’ he gasped for breath. ‘You’re just.....so funny.’
Sasha smiled back at him. ‘We’ll I’m glad I can make you more at ease’ she said, relaxing her body now.
‘Yeah’ Haru said straightening up. ‘I like having you around.’
‘You do?’ Sasha answered quickly.
‘I mean...!’ Haru fumbled, going suddenly red then. ‘Not like that it’s just...you know you’re so nice and....you know a good person you know?’
‘Yeah’ Sasha raised an eyebrow at him. ‘I know.’
She smirked at him.
‘You’re so awkward’ she mumbled turning away, but she spoke clearly so that Haru could hear.
Haru only averted his eyes.
‘Aww man I wish Amelia was here’ Sasha sighed. ‘If I hang out with you just by myself then people might start to think we’re a couple or something.’
Haru felt his heart skip a beat in his chest as he remembered Amelia’s words.
‘Sasha and I are lovers. We keep our relationship an absolute secret. She would kill me if she knew I had told you.’
‘What are you looking at?’ Sasha said, frowning at him with her hand upon her hip.
‘Oh no! Nothing! I wasn’t staring.’ Haru let out a sigh, forcing himself to relax a little more.
‘So, Amelia is in her music club.’

‘Yeah’ Sasha waved casually. ‘She plays the flute. She’s pretty good. Maybe you’ll hear her play one day.’
‘I would love that’ Haru beamed, clasping his hands together.
‘Do you play any instruments?’
‘Um I play the...violin...’ he told her, ‘and the piano.... I mean a little...’
‘Are you any good?’
‘I guess...I mean...I think I am.’
‘Hmph’ Sasha turned away in amusement. ‘I wish I could learn an instrument.’
‘Why don’t you?’
Sasha shrugged carelessly. ‘No particular reason, I just never got around to it.... never had time. I want to sit down’ she voiced suddenly, pointing ahead of them towards an empty bench.
‘Okay?’
‘Did you bring any food with you?’
‘Yeah I got some.’
‘Good, I’m starving. I brought my own food but I’d hate to eat it and have you watch.’
‘Ok’ Haru laughed.
They went over to the bench, sitting down together, a short gap between them.
Haru pursed his lips then, feeling a little awkward. He glanced over at Sasha who was ignoring him now, rummaging through her bag.
‘Oh woah’ Haru mumbled, seeing Sasha pull out a plastic bag full of food. ‘That’s a lot.’
‘I share with Amelia sometimes’ Sasha explained. ‘Or I share with others in the drama hall when we practice. Why, do you want something?’
‘No no I’m good’ Haru waved her away. ‘I was just saying.’
‘Do you think I’m fat?’
‘Of course not!’
‘Relax, I’m just teasing’ Sasha laughed at him. ‘No need to get defensive.’
Sasha leaned back, beginning to eat her pasta pot, as Haru took from his bag an apple, but he didn’t start eating it yet. He was too nervous, thinking he would make a mess.
‘It’s really cleared up hasn’t it?’
‘What? The weather?’ Haru replied.
‘Yeah, it’s actually turning out to be quite nice now. It’s not cold anymore’ Sasha said, tilting her head back towards the sky.
Haru bowed his head, smiling down at his lap.
‘What are you smiling at?’ Sasha asked.
‘Oh nothing.’
‘You shouldn’t do that’ Sasha told him. ‘People might start thinking you’re simple, if you start smiling at *nothing*.’
‘I’m just happy that’s all.’ Haru froze suddenly, staring at Sasha.
‘What’s wrong?’ Sasha asked.
‘I know I’ve only just noticed but....and its bad of me...’
‘What is it?’
‘You’ve got scratches on your face’ Haru said, ‘and one of your eyes is red.’

‘Yeah’ Sasha smiled, facing ahead and touching a hand to her sore eye. ‘When I was fighting one of them scratched me and caught my eye.’
‘This is all my fault’ Haru began to despair.
‘Not it isn’t’ Sasha spoke shortly. ‘I *wanted* to kick their asses and I’d do it again.’
‘But what if you got seriously hurt?’
Sasha shrugged. ‘I’d do it again anyway. ‘I’m not going to put up with their crap. Just give me an excuse to crack their nuts again. It would be my absolute pleasure.’
Haru began to laugh lightly behind his hand.
‘You’re really funny you know that? You kinda remind me of Aubrey.’
‘Yeah you said that. And I’m not like that jerk!’ Sasha glowered.
Haru only smiled back.
‘Oh, wait is that Ben?’ Sasha voiced suddenly.
Haru glanced up.
‘Oh yeah I think it is.’
Ben could be seen approaching them from a distance. They watched him drawing closer.
‘Hey I thought it was you guys when I saw you from a distance’ Ben said, sitting on the bench beside them.
‘How are you Ben?’ Sasha said to him.
‘I’m good. What happened to your face?’ Ben asked.
‘Something wrong with my face?’ Sasha said sounding defensive.
‘He’s talking about the scratch on your face....and your eye.’
‘Oh that’ Sasha mumbled, having seemingly forgot. ‘Well its fine’ she said. ‘Some guys were giving Haru some trouble. I just uh...well...’ she shrugged. ‘It doesn’t matter.’
Ben tilted his head at her, pursing his lips, but didn’t say anymore.
‘Where is Aubrey?’ Haru asked him.
‘Oh’ Ben said. ‘He’s in detention.’
‘What again?!’ Sasha cried. ‘What for this time?’
‘General attitude...apparently’ Ben trailed off.
‘Awww’ Sasha groaned. ‘I wish he would stop. He’s going to get expelled. That stupid idiot. I wish he would just stop…’
‘He really hates it here that much?’ Haru asked timidly.
‘Yeah’ Sasha sighed. ‘I don’t blame him. I don’t like it here that much but...I love my friends.’
Haru sighed.
Ben spoke to Haru then. ‘Was someone picking on you then? Is that why Sasha fought with someone?’
‘Yeah’ Haru mumbled, ‘something like that.’
‘You know they only do that because you’re weak. That’s why they pick on you. I don’t mean to sound horrid but...’
‘I understand’ Haru smiled at him. ‘I want to be strong. I will try again. I’ll try to be stronger next time.’
Ben smiled encouragingly at him.
‘We should hang out again here tomorrow’ Ben said. ‘We’re not going to the drama hall tomorrow, Amelia will be in her music class again.’

The next day it rained.
Haru stood by the window, staring outwards at the grounds. The skies were grey, and the rain pattered gently against the window.
‘Come and sit down’ Sasha said to him.
‘I thought I saw something out there’ Haru mumbled.
‘Like what?’ Sasha said, glancing up from her book.
‘I....don’t know. It looked like a girl.’
‘What?’
‘It’s nothing’ Haru mumbled, turning away from the window and walking up to their table.
He sat down in one of the seats, leaning forwards and staring at Aubrey, who lay on his back across the table.
For some reason Aubrey didn’t want so sit in a seat, but wanted to be on top of the table instead.
Beside Haru, Ben turned the page of his book, reading silently.
‘Is that a good book?’ Sasha asked Ben.
‘Yeah it is’ Ben replied.
‘What is it about?’
‘It’s really cool’ Ben said, closing the book and glancing down at the cover. ‘It’s about a merman who falls in love with a human, who turns out to be a man, but looks like a woman.’
‘Is that what you call a trap?’ Sasha said.
‘Something like that’ Ben frowned. ‘It’s an interesting story’ he mumbled, ‘the merman Tristan didn’t know that the human Historia was actually a man, he was shocked at first, but loved him anyway.’
‘That’s really sweet’ Sasha smiled. ‘It doesn’t matter who a person is, you fall in love with their heart and personality.’
Haru raised his eyes then, glancing over to her. But Sasha had her eyes down now, reading from her own book.
As he watched her, Haru thought of Amelia, and the secret she and Sasha shared.
I wonder what it feels like to have a secret like that, to keep something so special hidden from the world.
And then Haru’s attention drifted down to Aubrey, who still lay on his back on the table.
‘Are you feeling ok?’ Haru said to him.
‘Uh’ Aubrey groaned. ‘I have a really bad stomach ache. I think I’m going to die.’
‘Well maybe if you hadn’t eaten two whole packs of muffins you would be fine’ Sasha said to him without glancing up. ‘You’re such an idiot. What were you expecting? Honestly.’
‘I did it for a bet’ Aubrey groaned. ‘And I won.’
‘Moron’ Sasha sighed, still keeping her eyes down on her book. ‘Seriously though, that was like eight whole muffins.’
‘Uuuuuggggghhhhhhh’ Aubrey replied.

Haru's eyes travelled down Aubrey's body then as he lay on the table, slowly moving down to his feet, before going slowly back up again, up his legs and chest.
Haru jumped suddenly when he noticed that Aubrey was watching him closely.
'Are you staring at me?' Aubrey asked him.
'No way!' Haru panicked. 'I wouldn't. I mean I wasn't!
Aubrey frowned at him. 'I think you're protesting too much. Why are you staring at me?'
'Just leave him alone' Sasha glowered. 'You know how awkward he is.'
'Oh no please don't make excuses for me' Haru fumbled, feeling even more awkward.
'Look he's going red' Aubrey teased.
'Just knock it off all of you' Ben spoke angrily then. 'I'm trying to read, I can't hear myself think.'
'Yeah Aubrey shut up' Sasha mumbled, turning her attention back her book.
Haru continued to stare down at his lap, wishing Aubrey would look away, which he eventually did.
Haru could feel his face burning up, his cheeks red. He hated being like this, and making it obvious for everyone, but he couldn't help it. He was so envious of Aubrey and the others because of their confidence, and wished he could me more like them. Especially Aubrey.
Haru dared to glance up again. Aubrey lay across the table with his eyes closed now. Haru's attention lingered on Aubrey's face for a moment, before he looked away.
He let out a slight gasp, silent enough so that the others did not hear. There was something again outside, he saw, a pale figure on the edge of the trees outside, standing in the rain.
Haru stared at the figure for a moment in confusion, wondering whether what he saw was real.
'Hey what's that?' Aubrey asked suddenly, opening his eyes.
'You see it too?' Haru mumbled.
'Is that a girl?' Sasha asked frowned, transfixed now.

Haru sat in class after that, wishing he was sitting closer to the window. He wondered whether the pale figure was outside again, wondering who she was, and why she was there.
It was still raining outside, and as Haru glanced to the side, resting chin on his palm, he saw the grey and heavy clouds.
Haru let out a sigh, his attention drifting as he continued to stare through the window towards the sky. He was unable to hear the teacher now as she continued her lecture, reading from a textbook and turning to write on the whiteboard.
Haru heard a slight noise then, snapping him out of his trance he glanced around, seeing Kyle glaring at him.
Kyle smirked cruelly, looking Haru up and down critically.
Haru stared at him nervously, feeling his stomach tighten as he began to fear what Kyle would do next. He wondered what he would suffer.
Kyle looked ahead of him again, and Haru lowered his eyes to his desk, straightening in his seat. He swallowed the lump in his throat, before daring a glance over towards Kyle again, but Kyle did not turn for the second time.

Haru let out another sigh, his shoulders lowering as his body began to relax a little. He began to think of Aubrey, and of Sasha and Amelia, and their secret relationship together.
Haru was envious of them, wishing he could be that way with Aubrey, though perhaps not in secret.
Could he ever feel that way for me? Haru thought to himself.
He frowned silently to himself unhappily, feeling negative emotions stirring inside him.
I want to tell Aubrey how I feel. I want it so badly but.... I am afraid.
Haru lifted his pen, beginning to write in his open book. No one sat beside him, and he was able to write without being noticed. He began to write his feelings down in the book, trying to express himself in words, to alleviate some of the pressure on his heart.
When he was finished, he felt so much better, staring down at the page in his book.
At the bottom of the page, he had written Aubrey's name, and a heart around it.
Haru smiled to himself, turning the page over to hide what he had written, looking up towards the teacher again.
The class went as normal, and Haru sat alone, keeping to himself, and keeping his head down.
When class was over, Haru hung back, putting his books and pencils away slowly. He took his time, waiting for the others to exit the class before him.
Haru glanced up, seeing only the teacher waiting for him to leave.
He lifted his bag over his shoulder, walking quickly out of the class now.
Haru was just making his way out of the building, when he heard a sound that made him stop dead in his tracks.
It was the sound of a violin, playing in the distance.
Haru froze where he stood, turning and looking the other way.
His left hand twitched involuntarily then, and he made his way forwards, heading closer to the sound.
He walked down the corridor, coming closer to the classroom from which the sound came from.
The music slowly became clearer as Haru drew closer, standing before the classroom door.
He reached his hand out, sliding the door open, and that was when he saw Amelia, standing in the centre of the music room, illuminated by the glow of the light above her as she played.
She looked like an angel.

Chapter Nine

Haru stood in the doorway, entranced as he stared into the classroom, watching Amelia, until the melody came to an end.
Haru let out a breath, he didn't realise he had been holding.
Sasha who had been sitting on a low bookshelf glanced around then, gasping in delight.
'Oh Haru...what are you doing here?'

Haru's breath came in a shudder, drawing a sharp gasp between his teeth, the edges of his eyes crinkling as tears came to him.
'That was.....beautiful....' he hung his head then, body trembling, before he glanced up again, smiling at Amelia. 'That was amazing.'
Amelia smiled back at him, standing there with the bow and violin at her sides now.
'Why don't you come in?' Sasha invited.
Haru stepped into the room, closing the sliding door behind him.
'I heard um...' Haru began. 'I heard the music, from down the corridor.'
'I've been working hard and practicing more' Amelia beamed at him happily.
'I thought you played the flute' Haru voiced.
'I do' Amelia replied, bowing her head shyly then. 'I just started learning the violin.'
'You only just started?' Haru gasped. 'That was amazing.'
'Do you play any instruments?' Sasha asked him, remaining where she sat on top of the low bookshelf.
'I... yes' Haru laughed awkwardly. 'I um.... I play the violin also, and the piano.'
'Are you any good?' Sasha raised an eyebrow mischievously.
'I... I think I'm ok' Haru chuckled awkwardly.
'Why don't you show us how good you are?' Amelia invited.
Haru hesitated then, glancing from Amelia to Sasha and back again.
'Oh' he fumbled, 'I....no I couldn't. I wouldn't want to intrude.'
'Don't be silly' Sasha waved him away.
'I have to go anyway' Haru smiled, backing towards the door again. 'I'm sorry to interrupt.'
Amelia caught his eye then as he turned away, and he paused just for an instant, sharing a glance with her, her eyes happy as she looked at him, an understanding passing between them.
Haru wanted only to leave them alone, together.
He closed the door after him, letting out a sigh, feeling happy.
Haru turned away, walking back down the corridor slowly, making his way back towards his dormitory as he headed outside.
It had stopped raining now, but the clouds were still heavy, and as Haru glanced about the school grounds, he saw that it was empty. Everyone had already gone inside, to their dormitories, or whatever business or classes or clubs they had.
Haru thought he would not be disturbed as he made his way across the open grounds, heading towards the other building, towards the dormitories. But a figure stopped him suddenly. As he walked past a tree, he baulked, seeing a figure stepping out from behind it.
Haru instantly began to feel fear inside of him.
'Hello Haru' Kyle gleamed in an unfriendly manner. 'Fancy seeing you here.'
Haru immediately averted his gaze, clutching the straps of his bag tighter and hunching his shoulders.
'Were you waiting for me?' Haru mumbled, not looking at him, his voice barely audible.
'Squeak up!'
Haru's brow furrowed in anger then, turning his head to look back at Kyle.
'Why are you so weak?' Kyle asked him snidely. 'It's really quite pathetic.'
'Why are doing this? Why don't you leave me alone?'

‘Because you piss me off’ Kyle spoke dangerously, eyes flashing. ‘You’re fucking disgusting.’
‘Hu?’
Kyle shoved him backwards. Haru stumbled, caught by surprise he fell, tripping over his own feet.
Haru flinched at the pain in his body, the aches in his body from when he had been pushed down the stairs.
Kyle bent down, picking up the books that had fallen from Haru’s bag, having seen something interested.
‘What’s this?’
Haru glanced up, absolutely horrified as he realised what Kyle had picked up. It was his book, the one he had written in, confessing his feelings for Aubrey. His diary.
‘Oh my god....’ Kyle uttered, staring at the book.
Haru panicked then, rising to his feet and grabbing at the book.
Kyle grabbed Haru then, shoving him against the tree, holding him there, trapping him.
Haru whimpered in fear, gritting his teeth and tearing up.
Kyle glared at him for a moment, pressing his weight against Haru so that he could not move.
He held the book in his other hand, continuing to read what Haru had written.
Haru was unable to move, his mind foggy, unable to even think, he had frozen in fear.
‘Oh waw’ Kyle said, ‘you’re fucking gay?’ he laughed. ‘Are you fucking kidding me?’
Haru covered his face with his hands then, beginning to sob.
His knees trembled, feeling weak.
Kyle let go of him then, and Haru sunk to his knees, crying into his hands.
‘You’re fucking pathetic. Dam queer.’
‘Please don’t tell anymore’ Haru sobbed. ‘Please....I’m begging you.’
Kyle stared down at him, grimacing then.
‘Tch. You’re pathetic, how do you live with yourself?’
Kyle threw the book at Haru suddenly, turning and walking away
Haru fell silent then, tears continuing to roll down his cheeks. He watched as Kyle walked away, striding with his hands in his pockets.
Haru began to gather up his fallen books, putting them back into his bag and rising to his feet, feverishly wiping away his tears with his sleeve.
He gritted his teeth, feeling a pain inside his chest. He didn’t want to have a panic attack, not here, not now.
He waited for a moment, glancing around to make sure that Kyle had gone.
He was nowhere to be seen.
Haru turned, running now as he headed towards his dormitory.
When he got there, he found Nate already sleeping in bed.
Haru stared at him, turning to close the door quietly.
He put his bag down quietly, washing himself in the shower quickly and getting dressed in his pyjamas. He glanced over towards Nate who was fast asleep still, having not stirred.
Haru reached down to pick up his book, the one he had written his feelings in, his feelings for Aubrey.
Haru stared down at the book sadly, tears coming to his eyes again.

He got in bed, resting on his side and facing the wall. He clutched the book to him, crying silent tears as he hugged himself, he bowed his head, feeling so frustrated, and hating himself.
Hating himself for being so weak.
Aubrey.....

Chapter Ten

The next time Haru saw Aubrey, was the next day in the drama hall.
It was lunchtime, and as usual they expected to meet up in the hall again to practice the play, but Amelia and Ben had not shown up.
'Man, where are they?' Aubrey groaned. 'It's rude to keep people waiting, what's the deal?'
'I hope everything's alright' Sasha worried.
'Are you alright?' Aubrey asked Haru then. 'You look a little upset.'
'Oh no I'm fine' Haru smiled.
'Ok good' Aubrey beamed merrily back at him, before quickly turning away again.
But Haru's attention lingered on Aubrey just a little longer, and he began to wonder then, did he dare to speak what was on his mind?
Sasha and Amelia act as a couple if not in secret, would it be possible that Aubrey could ever accept me?
Haru let out a sigh, bowing his head. He stared at his lap sadly.
'Aubrey' he began, his heart beating painfully in his chest. 'Um...I wanted to ask you something.'
'What is it squirt?' Aubrey replied happily.
Squirt?
'I...um...' Haru mumbled.
'I can't hear you' Aubrey said.
Haru closed his mouth again, blinking back nervous tears.
I can't do this...
Haru glanced nervously up, seeing that Aubrey was already losing interest.
'Oh look here comes Amelia' Aubrey called out then.
'Is she crying?' Sasha worried, seeing he coming closer. 'Amelia what's wrong?'
'It's Ben' she sobbed, 'he's in the hospital...nurse's office...he's sick....'

'I promise I'm fine' Ben told them a short while later. 'I just had an asthma attack.'
'Wait what? Someone attacked you?' Aubrey gasped.
Sasha immediately smacked him over the back of the head. 'Idiot. Open your ears.'
'Don't you strike me!' Aubrey bellowed back.

The two began to wrestle in the background as Amelia leant forwards, hugging Ben tightly and completely ignoring the commotion going on behind her.
'I'm so glad you're alright' Amelia sobbed.
'I promise I am' he laughed, holding her back.
'I uh.....didn't know you had asthma' Haru mumbled awkwardly then, as Amelia let him go, straightening up again.
'Yeah well...' Ben glanced away, 'it's not something I like to talk about. I feel great now though' he told the others, grinning widely. 'Really I do....in fact...' he swung his legs off the edge of the bed then, rising to his feet. 'I feel myself again.'
Haru stared at Ben wide eyed, feeling great admiration in his heart for his character then.
He's so cool.
'So, when will you be able to continue practicing with us?' Aubrey asked Ben.
'Now' Ben replied. 'Best get a move on. We've only got a bit of time left.'

They left the nurse's office, heading quickly back to the drama hall to practice the play.
Ben was in the centre of the stage now, wearing a great purple feathered hat, reciting lines and gesturing dramatically as Aubrey followed his lines from the sheet, correcting him where necessary. Sasha stood beside them, listening closely and offering feedback and advice.
Haru sat beside Amelia in front of the stage, Amelia was writing notes in a book, and beside her, Haru watched, feeling sick and dizzy.
His left hand twitched involuntarily, and he lifted his eyes to the stage, watching Aubrey closely, and feeling an ache in his heart.

Haru attended his next class, beginning to feel much much worse.
He sat at his desk, swaying slightly, eyes out of focus as he stared down at his lap.
Haru glanced up then, looking across the room. He spotted Kyle, who had turned back in his chair to smirk at him.
Haru's heart began to race, and his palms began to sweat in fear.
He felt sick to his stomach, and as Kyle looked away again, facing the head of the class, Haru continued to stare at him, beginning to feel physically nauseous.

Haru missed his last class, feeling too unwell to attend, he went straight to his dormitory, lying down on the bed.
Haru only woke when Nate returned from his last class.
'Haru? Are you feeling alight?'
'Mmmmm' Haru groaned, turning slowly over in bed. 'I feel a little sick.'
'Is there anything I can get for you?'
'No thank you' Haru mumbled, not opening his eyes. 'I....just want to sleep.'
Nate left him alone after that, and Haru slept peacefully, his cheeks flushed as he breathed slowly.
The next morning Nate woke early, but Haru still remained in bed.

‘Haru?’ Nate voiced. ‘Are you alright?’
Haru opened his eyes, lifting his hand and brushing his grey hair back.
‘I think I’m....just going to stay in bed.’
‘Still feel sick hu?’
Haru smiled weakly. ‘I just.... can’t go to class today. I um.... mmmmmm....’ he never finished his sentence, closing his eyes and falling silent.
‘Can I get you anything?’
‘Nah’ Haru answered feebly. ‘Thanks.’
‘Do you want me to get a nurse?’
‘Nah’ Haru said again. ‘Thanks.’
‘Ok then’ Nate said turning away. ‘I’ll see you.’
Haru opened his eyes as Nate closed the door. Haru stayed in his bed, listening to the ringing silence.
He let out a sigh, closing his eyes again, and falling back to sleep.

Despite the fact he had slept peacefully the entire night, Haru slept that entire day also, waking only briefly to visit the bathroom, before going back to bed, without even having anything to eat. Though he made himself drink plenty of water, not wanting to become dehydrated.
He lay back against his headboard now, reading from his book the script from the play.
Many hours later towards the end of the day, Nate returned to the dormitory again.
‘You’re back early’ Haru smiled at him.
‘Yeah it was just a revision class’ Nate mumbled. ‘And you’re still in bed?’
‘Yeah’ Haru laughed awkwardly.
‘Have you had anything to eat?’
‘Not really.’
‘I’ll get you something.’
‘Oh no you don’t have to’ Haru fumbled.
‘I gotta go out again anyway, I left my book in class. Do you want me to get you something from the vending machines?’
‘Only if you’re passing one’ Haru said. ‘I don’t want to be any trouble for anyone.’
‘It’s no trouble. What do you want?’
‘I don’t mind. A sandwich or something. I got money in my bag.’
Nate rifled through the bag, taking out the wallet and taking a few coins.
‘I won’t be long’ Nate said.
‘Ok.’
‘See you in a bit.’
Haru sat back in bed, turning to glance out of the window towards the grounds of the boarding school.
He felt no surprise then, when he saw the ghostly figure of a young woman outside.
Haru stared, blinking slowly. He felt no fear or uncertainty as he watched this figure, as it drifted forwards, wandering listlessly across the grounds, until she was out of sight.
Nate returned shortly after.
‘I hope this is alright’ he said, handing Haru an egg cress sandwich.

‘Yes, that’s fine, thank you so much.’
‘You’ve had nothing to eat all day?’
‘I’ve not been hungry’ Haru replied.
Nate began to gather some of his things.
‘Where are you going?’
‘I’m going out’ Nate replied. ‘The teachers know. I have special permission to leave the school. I’m going to see my family. There is...you know...personal family stuff going on.’
‘I understand’ Haru said to him. ‘I hope everything is ok.’
‘Sure’ Nate said dismissively. ‘It’ll be fine. I just need to be with my family right now.’
Haru watched him go, Nate paused at the door.
‘See you around’ he said, carrying his bag over the shoulder, ‘I’ll be back maybe tomorrow.’
‘Bye Nate’ Haru smiled, and Nate closed the door.
Haru was alone again, glancing out of the window one last time, but saw nothing.
He turned over again, lying back in bed and closing his eyes. He rested for a time before eating and going back to sleep.
He slept that night peacefully, and was not interrupted or woken from his dreams, not even when someone tried to visit him.
Aubrey had been climbing the outside of the building, up the stone wall and using the ledges to hold onto. He came to the window of Haru’s room, glancing in.
He saw Haru sleeping in his bed, utterly still.
Aubrey clung onto the ledge outside the window, lifting his hand and knocking lightly on the glass. But Haru did not wake.
Aubrey let out a disappointed sigh, lowering his hand, as he continued to stare into the room at Haru’s sleeping figure.
He went away after that, climbing back down the building carefully.
Aubrey let go, landing lightly back down to the ground. He straightened then, glancing up to the window of Haru’s room one last time, before turning and walking away.

The next morning Haru heard a knock at the window, hearing it first in his dreams, before waking slowly, and hearing it again, clearer this time.
Haru sat up in bed, glancing around towards the window. He stared at the figure on the other side of the window, hardly surprised to see Aubrey hanging there outside the window smiling at him.
‘What are you doing?’ Haru asked him, once he had opened the window.
‘I wanted to see if you were alright’ Aubrey replied with a happy sigh. ‘It’s so good to see you. I was getting worried when you didn’t turn up to the drama hall yesterday.’
‘Oh, I’m fine’ Haru laughed, ‘I was just feeling a little unwell.....uh.....maybe you can come in? Instead of climbing up the building maybe you should use the doors? It’s dangerous what you’re doing.’
‘Hey that’s a good idea’ Aubrey mused. ‘Hang on a second. I’ll just climb down.’
Haru leant forwards out of the window, watching as Aubrey clambered awkwardly back down the side of the building.

Aubrey jumped down lightly, shooting Haru who still watched him a grin and a wave, before turning and jogging away.
Haru felt his heart skip a beat, feeling butterflies in his stomach. He clutched his hand over his heart, stepping back and closing the window.
He sat on his bed, waiting nervously for Aubrey to appear. It took him a long time it seemed, but Aubrey finally appears.
'So hi' Aubrey began, a mischievous smile upon his face.
'You know you could have just climbed in through window…. I mean…. since you were already there. Why did you go back down and around?'
'Oh right' Aubrey mumbled, frowning to himself, 'I didn't think….'
'Shouldn't you be in class?' Haru asked him tentatively.
'Those are unnecessary details' Aubrey winked, standing there suspiciously.
'What are you hiding behind your back?' Haru asked him cautiously then.
'You're not allergic to anything are you?'
'Not that I know of' Haru answered quietly.
'That's great' Aubrey cried out happily. 'In that case.....happy birthday!'
Haru stared at Aubrey in shock and he revealed what he had been hiding behind his back, which was a plain grey box.
'How did you know?' Haru asked him seriously, as Aubrey went over to the table, putting down the box and opening the lid carefully.
'I went into the main office and read your files remember?' Aubrey sang happily.
'You shouldn't have done that' Haru spoke seriously.
'Oh relax' Aubrey turned grinning to him. 'I didn't read anything personal, just the first page, and I saw that your birthday was today.'
'Thank you' Haru said, as Aubrey began to rummage through the plastic bag he had brought with him.
'I got some paper plates and plastic cutlery. We can eat it here if you like.'
'I.....would like that very much' Haru mumbled, blushing slightly.
'I hope you feel better' Aubrey spoke seriously, pausing for a moment.
Haru hesitated, glancing up at Aubrey and meeting his gaze.
Haru broke into a smile suddenly, feeling happy inside.
'I do' he told Aubrey. 'I feel much better. Thank you so much.'
'Can I share cake with you?'
'Of course you can.'
Aubrey cut a small piece for each of them, putting them on the paper plates and handing Haru his piece.
'I hope you like chocolate?'
'I love chocolate' Haru said happily.
'That's great. Ok hold on before you eat it.'
Haru went back to the plastic bag, quickly opening a pack of candles and taking one of them.
He turned, sticking one of the candles on top of Haru's slice and lighting it with a match.
'Make a wish' Aubrey smiled.
Haru began to cry then, unable to stop himself.
'Haru' Aubrey frowned at that.

‘I’m sorry’ Haru said, turning his head up at Aubrey then, smiling through his tears. ‘I’m just so happy.’
‘That’s awesome. As long as they’re tears of joy. Now hurry up and make a wish and blow out your candle.’
Haru looked down at his slice of cake, glancing up briefly to Aubrey before looking back down to the cake.
He drew a deep breath, blowing out the tiny flame.
‘Yeeeeeey’ Aubrey began to clap then. ‘Now tell me what you wished for?’
‘I can’t say that’ Haru teased. ‘It’s a secret. If I tell you then it might not happen.’
‘Oh, I see’ Aubrey gleamed, bringing his finger to his lips. ‘It’s a secret. Keep it close.’
Haru began to flush brightly then, feeling embarrassed. But Aubrey had turned away towards his own slice of cake.
‘I can’t stay long I’m afraid, but we’ll be back at lunchtime to see you, all of us.’
‘But you’re supposed to be practicing for the play at lunchtime’ Haru argued.
‘No’ Aubrey spoke firmly. ‘You are more important. We were all so worried about you yesterday, and the others want to see you. Plus we want some of your cake.’
Haru began to laugh at that. ‘I’m glad anyway that you came.’
‘That’s cool.’
Aubrey ate quickly, taking a drink of water before turning away.
‘Ok then see you around.’
‘That was quick’ Haru told him sadly.
‘I gotta go’ Aubrey waved at him. ‘I’m on kinda a thin line right now. My teacher.....ach.....such a pain. Anyway toodle-ooo! We’ll be back at lunchtime to visit the cake. Bye!’
He slammed the door shut and Haru stared at the door, feeling sad now that Aubrey was gone.
He began to cry silently to himself, feeling so happy that Aubrey had visited him, and at the same time, worrying for Aubrey, and the secret about him, the secret that Kyle now knew.
‘There’s still time’ Haru uttered to himself. ‘I....I love Aubrey but.....’ he frowned to himself, feeling a strong longing in his heart, ‘I have to accept that he may never love me... he may not feel that way...not ever…’

At lunchtime, they all came back to visit Haru, and Haru was happy.
Sasha and Ben talked together happily, as Haru and Aubrey and Amelia played cards together, and between them, they finished the cake off.
The next day, Haru was feeling much better, and was able to attend his classes as usual, but he still continued to worry. He worried about meeting Kyle again, worried about him spilling his secret, and he feared people finding out. But it seemed that for now at least, Kyle was keeping it to himself. But Aubrey was always on Haru’s mind, and he could not help thinking about him, throughout the day, every single day.
He was in love with Aubrey, but didn’t know what to do about it.
Aubrey only likes girls Haru thought, glancing over at him as they spent time together in the drama hall that lunchtime. *He may never feel the same way towards me. It could be that we may never be more than just friends.*

Chapter Eleven

A few days later, they were allowed to leave the grounds of the boarding school.
It didn't happen very often, but every once in a while, the school would have a short break, like a sort of holiday. It lasted for only a few days, and some of the student left the school to visit their families, most however stayed behind.
Haru and the others wandered together through the town just outside the boarding school. It was a pleasant and warm place, the sea not far away blew towards them a salty and fresh breeze.
'Oh, this is awesome' Haru breathed, tilting his head back. 'The air is so much better out here.'
'Yeah' Sasha agreed. 'You really don't notice it as much back home. Did I say home?' she suddenly realised. 'Waw, I guess I've been in school too long.'
'Well it won't be home for much longer' Aubrey reminded them all. 'Don't forget, our time in that place is limited. One day it will be over, and we may be separated by circumstances, as we each go our separate ways.'
'It's a scary thought' Haru mumbled sadly to himself. 'I.... I like things the way they are now. I don't want things to change.'
'Yeah I know' Aubrey sighed. 'I don't want things to change either, as much as I dislike school....it *is* a sort of home.'
'Do you really feel that way?' Haru asked him as they walked along slowly through the town, Ben and Sasha and Amelia listening to the discussion silently.
'What do you mean?' Aubrey asked him.
'Well that uh....' Haru began, scratching the back of his head. 'About school being like home?'
Aubrey's expression grew tender then as he smiled sadly at Haru.
'Yeah' he said. 'I do kinda think of school like home. Even though I hate it. I have friends you know? My own home is just.... unpleasant...' He ran his fingers through his black hair then, an action that caused Haru's heart to flutter. 'I am looking forwards to leaving school' Aubrey said, 'for my own freedom if nothing else. But I will always remember the good times I had with my friends, but the thing is.... life is always changing. You cannot hold onto the past, you have to move with the times, and take on the challenges that life brings.'
'Well said' Sasha smiled at that. 'But no matter what happens, I'd like to think that we will all still be friends, even if our paths diverge.'
'Yeah' Aubrey smiled, 'I'd like that.'
'Oh no' Ben sighed then, coming to a stop.
But Amelia had noticed first and was already offering Haru a tissue she had brought with her, she had prepared for the moment.

‘I’m sorry’ Haru mumbled into the tissue, dapping at his eyes. ‘I just.... I don’t want to lose any of you.’
‘Its ok, we’re not going anywhere’ Amelia smiled. ‘Not yet anyway. We’ll still always be friends Haru. Don’t you worry.’
‘I’m so glad that uh....’ Haru began.
‘What is it?’ Amelia smiled, holding onto Sasha’s arm.
‘If I hadn’t been brave enough to speak to Aubrey in the beginning’ Haru said turning to him, ‘then I would never have met all of you.’
He remembered his mother’s words then, and he heard her voice in his head.
It just takes one act of bravery, a single breath, a heartbeat……just say the words……
‘I never got a chance to thank you’ Haru said to Aubrey, turning to face him now. ‘It was because of you’ he beamed. ‘You opened up my world.’
‘No’ Aubrey smiled warmly back. ‘It was because of you.’
Haru grinned at that. He had stopped crying now.
‘I uh.... I was scared to talk to you at first’ Haru awkwardly admitted. ‘But um... I’m glad I did.’
‘Good’ Aubrey grinned. ‘I’m glad you’re glad. Now let’s get going. I’m hungry.’
He strolled away suddenly, and Sasha and Ben continued on with him.
Amelia and Haru lingered back for a moment, exchanging a glance.
Amelia put her finger to her lip teasingly, winking at Haru before following after Sasha.
Haru felt happy as he watched her run to catch up with Sasha, her friend and secret lover. Haru felt so happy that Amelia trusted him with this secret. He would never tell anymore.
‘Hurry up slowpoke!’ Aubrey called back to him. ‘We’re not waiting for you!’
‘I’m coming’ Haru fumbled, before jogging after the others.

They sat at a café a short time later, the five of them gathered around the little table just outside the door, eating and drinking happily together.
‘This is the life’ Ben sighed happily, staring down at his sandwich.
‘It sure is’ Sasha beamed. ‘I’m just glad I don’t have to go home’ Sasha sighed. ‘Its such a drag.’
‘You don’t want to go home either?’ Haru smiled at her.
‘I love my family’ Sasha replied, ‘but.... I don’t know.... they’re a little suffocating sometimes. I just...’ and as Haru watched her closely, he noticed the glance she sent towards Amelia, the slight body language. ‘I like being with my friends’ Sasha finished.
‘Yeah’ Haru agreed. ‘Me too.’
‘Ah shit I have to go now’ Ben fumbled, quickly finishing his drink and rising to his feet.
‘Where are you going?’ Aubrey asked.
‘I’m going to meet my girlfriend.’
‘I didn’t know you had a girlfriend?’ Haru said to him.
‘She’s new’ Ben winked back before turning away. ‘I said I would meet her here, and there she is.’
They all glanced around then to see a young woman walking towards them and smiling.
‘I’ll see you around’ Ben said hastily to them, gathering up his things.

‘Have fun’ Aubrey waved.
Haru frowned slightly as he watched, seeing the girl that was waiting for Ben. He didn’t know her, but she reminded him of someone he knew.
She had long auburn hair...
Haru bowed his head, staring at his lap, but the others didn’t seem to notice as they watched Ben and his new girlfriend walk away, hand in hand.
‘They’re so sweet together aren’t they?’ Sasha sighed dreamily.
‘Yeah they are’ Amelia beamed, ‘so lucky.’
‘Anyone want dessert?’ Aubrey voiced loudly then.
‘Yey’ Amelia clapped her hands happily.
Aubrey moved off to get them all dessert while Sasha and Amelia talked together happily. But Haru now was in a world of his own.
Jasmine.....
‘Are you alright Haru?’
‘What?’
Haru glanced up suddenly then, caught off guard.
‘You seem a little distracted’ Sasha said to him. ‘Is everything alright?’
‘Oh yes of course!’ Haru spoke hastily, waving at her. ‘I just.... drifted off for a second.....sorry I was.... just thinking about things.’
‘Anything important?’
‘No not at all’ Haru smiled.
Sasha frowned at him in amusement.
‘You’re really funny sometimes’ she said to him.
‘Am I?’ Haru replied worriedly.
‘I’m back’ Aubrey declared, appearing suddenly, strategically carrying four plates of dessert, one for each of them. ‘Haru you didn’t say what you wanted so I got you chocolate. Is that ok?’
‘Oh, thank you’ Haru said. ‘Yes, that’s fine.’
Aubrey put the plates down carefully before he dropped them, sitting and handing each of them a fork.
Haru took his gratefully with thanks, and the four of them began to eat.
And Haru was happy.

Afterwards they went to wander about the town itself, and it was a beautiful place.
Sasha jumped up to walk along one of the walls by the pavement, balancing carefully with her arms out, Amelia walking beside her and smiling, careful to catch her if she were to fall. Sasha lost her balance and tumbled to the side, falling into Amelia’s arms who caught her. The two began to laugh together happily, Sasha straightening up as Amelia put her down carefully.
Walking after them was Aubrey and Haru, who both smiled at the sight of the two having fun.
‘Come on guys’ Sasha called out excitedly, ‘I want to see the fish.’

Near the edge of the town closer to the sea, was a large courtyard garden that was carefully managed, little ponds elevated on short platforms where you could sit and watch little goldfish swimming in the clear waters.
Aubrey sat on one of the walls, overlooking one of the ponds. He put his fingers into the water, smiling as he felt the little fish nibbling his fingertips.
'It kinda tickles' he said. 'You should try it' he said to Haru. 'Its really cool.'
'Ok' Haru began tentatively, stepping up to the platform and putting his fingers into the water. 'Oh waw' he beamed, feeling so happy again, 'it does tickle, it feels kinda weird.'
'Have you never had goldfish before?'
'Not really' Haru said, drawing his hand back. 'I was never really allowed pets.'
'My family had pets. Mostly cats. And they're assholes.'
Haru giggled behind his hand at Aubrey.
'What's so funny?'
'Nothing...its just...' Haru straightened up again, lowering his hand. 'You're funny that's all.'
'I don't mean to be.'
'That's fine' Haru said to Aubrey. 'I like you that way. Please don't change.'
'I don't plan on it' Aubrey said raising an eyebrow.
Haru stared back at Aubrey, feeling a glow in his heart.
I love you Aubrey he thought silently in his mind. *I love you.*
'You're a great friend' Haru said to him.
'Why do you say that?' Aubrey asked sceptically.
'No reason' Haru replied, glancing at Sasha and Amelia who were together a short distance away, standing before another little pond. 'I'm just happy that's all' Haru said.
'Good' Aubrey replied. 'I'm glad you're happy. And you're a good friend too. All in all,' he said, 'today is pretty good.'
'Yeah' Haru sighed. 'It is.'

This break lasted for only a short time, and soon enough, Haru, Aubrey, Ben, Sasha and Amelia were all back in school.
The lessons went as usual, and Haru, still very conscious of Kyle still glaring and shooting him unfriendly looks, tried his best to ignore him, and to not let it bother him. But it did, and Haru feared that any day now Kyle would tell everyone his secret.
Would it even be a bad thing? Haru wondered to himself as he began to daydream, resting his chin on his palm as he stared out the window. *Maybe Aubrey should know...*
He wasn't at all surprised then to see the figure of the girl outside wandering the grounds. He watched her for a time, wondering whether or not he was really seeing her, until he was brought abruptly out of his thoughts.
'Haru' his teacher said firmly. 'The lessons in here, not outside, now what was the answer to my question?'
Haru flushed brightly then, glancing down at his open book.
'I....d-don't know.'
'Please pay attention' the teacher told him patiently, as Haru tried to ignore the stares from the rest of the class.

He glanced up tentatively after a time, noticing Kyle was still staring at him.
As soon as they made eye contact, Kyle smirked and just turned away.
Haru glanced back down to his book sadly, suddenly wanting to cry.
He didn't understand bullies, and didn't understand how they could get pleasure from tormenting others. But they did.
Haru furrowed his brow, staring tiredly at his desk.
He wished only to be with his friends now.

That lunchtime, they did not go to the drama hall, because Amelia was in her music class. Aubrey once again, was in detention, because he had missed so many classes and had been made to catch up on all the work he had missed. The teachers as usual, were not pleased with him.
It was just Haru and Sasha and Ben together now, sitting outside in the sun. Ben was paying attention to his lunchbox now, picking at his sandwich. Haru sat on the bench beside him, an open book upon his lap, but Haru was not reading now, instead he tilted his head back, staring at the sky, the light breeze upon his face, blowing back his grey hair.
'What do you think?' Sasha voiced suddenly, and Ben and Haru both glanced over at her.
She was a short distance from them, kneeling before a flowerbed, planting many purple tulips.
'I bought these from town the other day' Sasha voiced happily, sitting back on her knees and wiping her brow. 'Amelia is going to love this.'
'You've got a gift for her?' Haru smiled.
'Yes' Sasha smiled joyfully back, 'she loves tulips, especially purple ones.'
'They are so pretty aren't they?' Haru agreed happily.
'Did you get permission to plant on the school grounds?' Ben asked her.
'Of course,' Sasha replied, waving her tiny spade at Ben. 'I'm a good student. They were happy for me to plant these. See? It pays off to be a good student.'
'Yes. It's a shame Aubrey couldn't be with us' Haru sighed.
'Well he should stop breaking the rules' Sasha scowled.
Her eyes widened then as there came a commotion some distance away, across the field, something was happening.
Haru turned, gasping at what he saw.
Kyle was in trouble. He was in a confrontation with another man, one who looked terrifying, far taller and muscular than him, he practically lifted Kyle off the ground.
Haru rose to his feet, suddenly tense and very afraid.
The first time someone was in danger, he did nothing to help. When Sasha ran to help him the day Haru was pushed down the stairs. He could only sit and stare in horror as they fought with her, because he was too weak to move, too afraid.
He didn't want to be that person. He wanted to be a stronger person, a better person.
Haru shook his head at what he saw, breaking himself out of his trance and gritting his teeth.
He ran forwards, without fully realising what he was doing. Ben and Sasha staring after him in disbelief.
'*Haru what are you doing?*' Sasha screeched after him, rising sharply to her feet.

‘No wait!’ Ben called out, grabbing her then to stop her.
Sasha stared at him in alarm, before looking back at Haru.
‘What is he doing?’ she gasped.
Haru grabbed the arm of the bigger man, trying to break his grasp on Kyle.
‘Let him go!’
The bigger man shoved Kyle back onto the floor. Kyle picked himself up quickly, kneeling and staring wide-eyed up at the both of them, as Haru put himself between the two.
‘Leave him alone!’ Haru called out.
‘Why are you protecting him’ the larger man said, ‘everyone knows how much he picks on you?’
‘I don’t care’ Haru snapped back. ‘You don’t bully people.’
‘You know I could snap you like a twig.’
‘I don’t care’ Haru balled his fists, hunching his shoulders tense. ‘Just leave him alone!’
‘He deserves what bad he gets’ the other guy said to him, as people all around in the field stopped to stare, seeing what was going to happen next. ‘He’s an arrogant little shit, and I’m gonna pummel him.’
‘Then you’ll have to get through me.’
‘You’re joking right?’ the guy frowned.
‘I don’t care what he’s done’ Haru spoke firmly. ‘You don’t hurt people. Even if they hurt you first.... it doesn’t justify it.’
The guy before him gave him a level stare, looking past Haru then to Kyle still on the grass.
‘You should thank him’ he said to Kyle. ‘I’d have killed you.’
The guy turned suddenly without another word, stalking away.
Haru let out a sigh, knees beginning to tremble.
No, I’m not going to collapse, I’m not going to collapse.
He brought his hand to his mouth then, feeling sick, feeling suddenly as if he were to throw up.
It just takes one act of bravery, a single breath, a heartbeat……just say the words……
Haru gritted his teeth, blinking back his tears furiously.
He lowered his hand, letting out a deep breath, forcing himself to remain in control.
Haru quickly rubbed his eyes dry with his sleeve, before straightening and turning around to face Kyle, who stared up at Haru in shock and disbelief.
Haru smiled.
‘Why did you do that?’ Kyle demanded, rising slowly to his feet.
‘I just.... wanted to.’
‘But why?’
‘Because..... you needed help’ Haru finished awkwardly. ‘That’s all.’
It was at that moment that Sasha and Ben rushed up to him.
‘Idiot what are you doing?’ Sasha hissed. ‘You could have gotten seriously hurt!’
‘But I didn’t’ Haru smiled, more confidently now. ‘I’m alright.’
‘Haru what were you doing?’ Ben demanded. ‘Why would you do that?’
‘If Ben hadn’t held me back...’ Sasha spoke angrily.
‘It would have been a lot messier’ Ben finished. ‘You’re not always the best at calming a situation.’

‘What do you mean?’ Sasha snapped suddenly flustered.
‘See you’re doing it now.’
‘Can I speak alone with Haru?’ Kyle voiced suddenly.
The others fell quickly silent, staring at him in surprise.
‘Oh no, I don’t think so’ Sasha said after a time. ‘You can shove your head up your own ass for all I care.’
‘Rude!’ Ben spoke up then.
‘Its ok you guys’ Haru spoke tentatively, ‘I don’t mind.’
‘I want to talk alone’ Kyle pressed.
Sasha looked even angrier at that, but Ben quickly calmed her with a few soft words.
‘It’s fine’ Haru smiled. ‘I’ll be ok’ he said. ‘I’ll be back soon, I’ll just be gone for a minute.’
‘If you do anything to upset Haru again’ Sasha glared at Kyle hatefully, ‘I’ll rip off your balls.’
‘Sasha knows how to hit where it hurts’ Ben laughed awkwardly at that. ‘Ok’ he said steering Sasha away. ‘We’ll talk to you later Haru. Bye!’
Haru watched them with amusement for a few moments, before turning back to Kyle, feeling suddenly a little nervous.
‘Can we uh....’ Kyle began, ‘go somewhere a little more private?’
‘Sure’ Haru said. ‘No problem.’

Haru left the field with Kyle trailing slowly after him.
They stopped at the edge of the field, blocked from view by the trees that grew here, Kyle averted his gaze, staring at the ground.
‘Why did you do that?’ he asked Haru sullenly, ‘after the way I treated you.’
‘I don’t care about that’ Haru mumbled, ‘I just.... didn’t want to see anyone get hurt.’
‘Not even if it was me?’
‘Of course not.’
Kyle smirked then, turning away. ‘I wouldn’t care if someone I didn’t like got hurt. Especially if it was someone like me who deserved it.’
‘I don’t care’ Haru said again. ‘I’m not that way. You don’t mend violence with violence.’
‘You see that’s where you’re wrong’ Kyle said.
‘And that’s where we differ’ Haru replied.
Kyle stared at him for a few moments, before his expression relaxed.
‘You’re so weird, so different, but you’re not as weak as I thought you were.’
‘Well I’m trying to be better’ Haru laughed uncomfortably, scratching the back of his head. ‘I um.... well... I am trying to be stronger.’
‘Hm.’
‘I won’t lie though’ Haru admitted, ‘I was a little scared.’
‘You were terrified.’
Haru froze, staring back at Kyle.
‘You were a lot scared’ Kyle went on, ‘and you still came to help me.’

‘I would have done it.... I mean I would have tried to protect anyone, no matter what they did.’
‘Idiot.’
‘What?’
‘I’m gratefully anyway’ Kyle said to him.
‘Um....thanks’ Haru replied a little uncertain.
‘Listen’ Kyle said. ‘I won’t tell anyone about.... your secret.’
Haru swallowed nervously.
‘Its not my business’ Kyle went on, ‘your personal life...I should not have said anything. I’ll keep in a secret.’
‘Do you promise?’ Haru spoke up then, his voice trembling. ‘I....I’m not ready for him to know.’
‘Well if he finds out’ Kyle said, ‘it won’t be from me.’
‘Thank you.’
‘I have to go now’ Kyle said, ‘I said what I needed to say, I won’t bother you again.’
Haru raised his head as Kyle turned and walked away suddenly, watching him go.
He let out a sigh, feeling his heart beating painfully in his chest. He was so nervous it hurt, and he swallowed the lump in his throat, trying to force himself to be strong as his legs trembled, still afraid for what had just happened. Not truly believing even now what had happened, that he had found the courage to do what he just did.
He let out another sigh, breathing calmly, blinking slowly.
I have to get back to the others he thought to himself. *My friends.*
Haru turned on his heel and made his way back to Sasha and Ben who waited for him, watching him closely from the bench they had been sitting on.
Haru approached them and hugged them both simultaneously.
‘What?’ Sasha blinked in surprise. ‘Is everything alright Haru?’
‘Yes’ he breathed, tears coming to his eyes then. ‘I’m absolutely fine’ he smiled.
He suddenly thought of something at that moment. The figure he had seen lingering in the school grounds, he wondered if he would see her, and he glanced about for her, but she was nowhere to be seen.
‘It’s a shame Aubrey and Amelia aren’t with us’ Haru lamented, letting go of them and straightening.
‘Amelia yes, Aubrey? No.’ Sasha spoke.
‘Always so mean to him’ Haru smiled in amusement.
‘Anyway’ Sasha frowned. ‘I have to finish planting these tulips. I want Amelia to see them. She’s going to be so happy.’

The next day, Aubrey found Haru in the corridor, seeking him out just as lunch was starting.
‘There you are squirt!’ Aubrey called out happily.
‘Squirt?’ Haru repeated, frowning up at him.
‘You going to the drama hall now?’ Aubrey asked, leaning forwards with his hands in his pockets and wearing a teasing expression.
‘Um.... yes, I was’ Haru said.

‘Aubrey there you are’ Ben huffed, running to catch up behind him. ‘Don’t run off like that, I was in the middle of talking to you.’
‘Sorry bean’ Aubrey said grinning back at Ben.
‘Bean?’ Ben repeated in confusion.
‘Yeah, its your new nickname’ Aubrey grinned. ‘Haru’s is squirt’ he said happily, leaning on Haru’s head and making him very uncomfortable.
‘P-please don’t call me that’ Haru mumbled.
‘What did you say?’ Aubrey asked him.
‘Nothing’ Haru glanced away.
‘Lets all go to the hall then’ Aubrey spoke, ‘I’m hella-hungry.’
‘Yeah my stomach is growling a little too’ Haru smiled bashfully.
‘Poke.’
‘What are you doing?’ Haru spoke nervously then to Aubrey.
‘Dude, don’t touch people’s stomachs’ Ben said. ‘Its weird.’
‘Not sorry’ Aubrey grinned, straightening up and putting his hands back in his pockets.
Haru glanced at him briefly, blushing slightly before quickly looking away.
‘Are you ready to act your heart out little sprout?’ Aubrey winked.
‘Sure’ Haru mumbled.
‘Stop teasing people’ Ben said to Aubrey, who only grinned cheekily back at him in response.
They made their way down the corridor, walking slowly together.
‘Have you read any more of the play?’ Aubrey asked Haru as they walked along.
‘I’ve been reading it a little everyday’ Haru gleamed proudly.
‘That’s great’ Aubrey said merrily.
‘I feel a lot better onstage’ Haru went on, ‘I want to be like Sasha’ he said, ‘she spoke so confidently onstage before, like you’ he added to Aubrey.
‘Me?’ he blinked.
‘Sasha is pretty good’ Ben remarked. ‘She’s been doing it for a long time, she used to be in drama clubs in her previous school.’
‘Really?’ Haru said. ‘Did you go to the same school as her?’
‘Yeah’ Ben replied as beside him Aubrey took a pen out of his pocket and began to play with it, twirling it in the air. ‘I’ve known Sasha for a long time.’
‘I’m jealous’ Haru smiled awkwardly.
‘Why?’ Ben asked.
‘Well you’re just all such nice people, thanks to Aubrey I met you all and....well I was always.... you know...’
‘Yeah you don’t have to keep reminding me’ Ben laughed. ‘You’re getting a lot better, I can’t believe you stood up to that guy yesterday, and to protect Kyle of all people.’
‘What’s this?’ Aubrey asked abruptly, dropping the pen he had been balancing on his nose.
‘Haru ran to help Kyle when he was in trouble’ Ben smiled. ‘He could have gotten really hurt, Sasha was...not happy’ he finished. ‘But Haru did an amazing thing.’
‘Oh, please don’t’ Haru began to flush brightly then in embarrassment. ‘You’re making me sound like a superhero or something.’
‘Well not all heroes wear capes’ Ben replied.

‘Oh no please don’t!’ Haru cried out panicing now. ‘That was so cringy!’
Aubrey beside began to laugh hysterically.
‘You look like a cherry’ he pointed to Haru.
‘Please don’t’ Haru fumbled, turning a brighter red.
By the time they reached the end of the corridor, Aubrey had stopped laughing, and Haru’s face had returned to its natural colour.
‘You’re so mean to me’ Haru told him glumly, pouting a little.
‘I’m sorry I don’t mean to’ Aubrey sighed. ‘It just happens you know? I just can’t help myself…’
They stepped out of the main doors of the building, walking down the steps.
‘What are you going to do next time we have a break?’ Ben asked them, ‘do you-’
The body hit the ground right before them. There was silent horror. Aubrey screamed.
Haru stared frozen at the body of Amelia as she lay before them, facing away, blood pooling around her head.
Her fingers were still twitching.
Ben stumbled back silently, hand going to his mouth as if he were about to be sick. He glanced about him as more people began to scream, seeing what had happened.
Ben turned and ran away to get help.

Chapter Twelve

The others were with Sasha when she was first told, and she fell to her knees in despair, crying openly, hysterically into her hands, trying to deny what had happened, saying over and over again how it could not be real.
‘This can’t be real. She’s still alive! She has to be!’
Aubrey embraced Haru, crying silently into his shoulder as Haru stared at Sasha, speechless, beside them Ben stood alone, eyes wide and to the floor in shock.
‘Sasha’ the teacher spoke tenderly, ‘I’m so sorry...’

The funeral was a few days later, all classes were closed that day, and her friends and family gathered at the church.
It was cloudy, and the air was heavy with moisture. It threatened rain, but for the longest time it held off.
Sasha approached the coffin before it was lowered into the ground, leaning over it and sobbing, grasping at the wood as tears streamed down her cheeks.
Haru glanced up at her, eyes teary and heart twisting in his chest.

He watched as an older female figure he did not recognise stepped forward then, grasping Sasha lightly by the arm and pulling her gently back.
Sasha straightened, stepping back and burying her face in her hands, her body trembling all over.
When the ground was covered, and the headstone stood there before the fresh dirt, Sasha approached the grave, placing a bouquet of purple tulips before the white headstone.
After that, when most of the others had gone, Sasha and her friends still remained.
Haru found Sasha at the edge of the graveyard alone, sitting back against a tree, eyes red from crying.
Haru approached her.
'W-we're going home now' Haru said to her. 'I mean.... back to school. The cars are waiting… and um....'
He broke off, glancing away.
'We were worried' Haru went on, 'we were wondering where you went.'
Sasha still did not respond, but continued to sit back against the tree, staring up at the clouds.
She gasped then, a tear running down her cheek.
'It just isn't fair' she breathed, her voice weak and rasping. 'I can't believe this has happened.'
Haru approached her, kneeling before her, 'if there is anything I can do for you' he began, 'I mean.....we're all here for you and... I'm sorry I'm not good at this.'
'I tried to help her' Sasha breathed slowly. 'I..... *I'm so sorry Amelia'* she spoke to the air. 'I'm sorry I was not good enough to save you. I'm sorry I couldn't do enough.'
'Sasha....'
She gritted her teeth, grasping at the hem of her dress, pulling her knees up to her chest.
'I love Amelia....I loved her.'
'I know about.... you two' Haru said.
'What?' Sasha gasped, eyes wide with shock. 'I never...told anyone.'
'Amelia told me' Haru said to her sadly, tears in his eyes. 'I.... the truth is I..... I was crying one day, can you believe it?' he spoke, the edges of his lip twitching. 'She found me in the drama hall, and she comforted me. I told her...' Haru broke off then, eyes becoming distant as he thought back to that day. 'I want to tell you something' he said to Sasha, 'but I want you to keep it a secret.'
'Ok' Sasha mumbled, 'what is it? I won't tell anyone.' Her voice was raspy as she spoke.
'The truth is' Haru began, 'I am in love with Aubrey.'
'Really?'
'I was crying because... well I can't fully explain it' Haru uttered. 'I.... my feelings are just so conflicted. I don't know what to think or how I should feel. It doesn't matter, this isn't about me. But...Amelia found me, and she comforted me, then she told me...about you.'
'She did?'
'Yeah.'
Haru swallowed the lump in his throat, it hurt to speak Amelia's name now, after what had happened, after losing her so suddenly. It still didn't seem real.
'Amelia helped me' Haru said. 'She....' but he couldn't finish.
Haru bit his tongue, bowing his head and shoulders trembling.

‘Haru...’
He leant forwards, embracing Sasha, holding onto her tightly.
‘I’m sorry’ Haru gasped. ‘I’m so sorry.... I know what its like to lose someone.’
She held him back, eyes wide and red.
‘Let’s go’ she whispered to him after a time, ‘we should get back. I don’t want to keep the others waiting.’
‘Ok’ Haru breathed, letting her go.
‘Can I hold your hand?’ Sasha asked. ‘It would make me feel better.’
‘Of course,’ Haru said reaching out to her, and Sasha took his hand tentatively.
‘Thank you’ she mumbled, fresh tears spilling down her cheeks. ‘Let’s go.’
It began to rain lightly as they made their way back to the waiting cars, walking slowly across the graveyard.
Sasha paused then, glancing up at the clouds.
‘It’s falling at last’ she smiled weakly, tilting her head back further and feeling the raindrops upon her cheeks. ‘It’s been holding off for so long.’ She let out a sigh then, blinking slowly. ‘Amelia always loved the rain.’
She looked ahead again, seeing Haru smiling at her, still holding hands.
‘Come on’ Haru prompted, and as they continued on, reaching the main gates, they found Ben and Aubrey waiting for them.
‘Hey guys’ Sasha smiled weakly at them.
‘How are you doing?’ Aubrey asked her.
Sasha frowned.
‘Let’s go back’ she said. ‘I feel a little tired.’

Days passed, and a memorial was help for Amelia at the school, and Sasha spoke at the podium, but Haru was not there to see.
Shortly after the funeral, he became very sick, running a high fever again, and spending most of his time in bed for many days after that.
Aubrey had tried to visit, knocking on his window and speaking his name.
But Haru would not wake.
‘He’s probably just stressed’ Ben spoke in a monotone to Aubrey when he said about this. ‘You know what he’s like. He’s weak’ he finished in a small voice.
Aubrey glanced at him, biting his lip, before looking away, bowing his head and staring at his lap.
‘I feel sick’ Aubrey mumbled.
‘Yeah’ Ben said. ‘Me too.’
‘It just doesn’t seem real.’
‘Maybe we shouldn’t think about it’ Ben said.
‘No’ Aubrey shook his head. ‘We all have to grieve, we.... all have our own ways of coping.’
Aubrey straightened then, looking across the sunny grounds.
‘Is Sasha out again?’ he asked.

‘Yeah’ Ben said. ‘She’s been leaving the school. Its not allowed but... the teachers are turning a blind eye.’
‘I wonder where she’s going?’ Aubrey lamented.
Ben said nothing.
The entire school felt very subdued and hushed now. Many people had known Amelia, and even those that didn’t were affected by her loss too, for everyone knew someone that suffered depression. Everyone knew someone that self-harmed or had suicidal thoughts at least once in their lives, even if they didn’t know it.
‘Do you think things will ever go back to the way they were?’ Ben said to Aubrey.
‘Of course they will’ Aubrey replied. ‘Things won’t be exactly as they were before, but there is always a new normal. Life is always changing. None of us are who we were a few years ago, and we will be different again come next year, and the year after that. Even if the change is only small...’
Ben dipped his head, listening to Aubrey, and considering his words.
‘She would want us to continue’ Aubrey spoke quietly. ‘She would want us....to keep on living, to live a happy life, a life to the fullest.’
He looked across the grounds to the other students, and even now things seemed hushed.
‘Do you believe in an afterlife?’ Ben asked.
‘No’ Aubrey replied. ‘And that’s why, this one life we *know* we have....is all the more precious...’
Ben rose to his feet then.
‘Where are you going?’ Aubrey asked him.
‘It’s time.’
‘Oh.’ Aubrey looked down again. ‘How are they going?’
‘Its going fine I guess.... I just.... never really saw a counselor before....it feels kinda weird opening up to a stranger.’
‘Yeah I get that.’
‘I just.... I suffer night terrors now, I can’t get that.... what I saw out of my head....it was just so horrible...’
Ben covered his face with a hand, beginning to cry now.
‘Oh god’ he said swallowing, ‘it was just so horrible. I’ve never felt this way before, I’ve never...’
Aubrey stared at him calmly, saying nothing as he remained where he was sat on the grass.
Ben let out a sigh, controlling himself. He straightened and lowered his hand.
‘I uh.... I’ll see you around then’ he spoke quietly to Aubrey.
‘Ok’ Aubrey said, his voice husky. ‘See you.’
Ben walked slowly away, Aubrey staring after him.
Ben did not look back.
Aubrey bowed his head then, staring at the grass beneath him, sitting cross-legged.
He began to pull at the grass lazily, twirling it between his fingers, before pulling up a few of the daisies and beginning to make a chain.
He didn’t go to class after that, not bothering to care.
When he grew bored of making daisy chains, he just lay back on the grass, staring up at the blue sky, and feeling the warm sun upon his face.

‘Its too nice to go to class’ he said to himself, ‘too nice.....’
He closed his eyes, beginning to doze off.
He only woke hours later when Ben came to find him.
‘You’re still here?’ Ben said.
‘I can’t go to class’ Aubrey said groggily. ‘What time is it?’
‘Classes are over’ Ben replied.
‘Oh.’
‘Do you want to come to my dorm with me to hang out?’ Ben asked him. ‘I don’t want to be alone.’
‘Maybe we could watch a film’ Aubrey spoke to the sky. ‘It’s starting to get dark’ he added in a mumbled, speaking to himself. ‘It’s starting to get cold.’
‘I feel like you’re all I have now’ Ben said to him. ‘Haru is sick, and Sasha...she’s coping on her own.’
‘I’ll be here’ Aubrey said to him, sitting up. ‘I’m not going anywhere.’
‘I just want to take my mind off it all. I wish I could forget everything.’
Aubrey rose to his feet, jogging after Ben as he turned to walk away.
‘How did the meeting with the counselor go?’ Aubrey asked.
‘Fine.’
‘Anything you want to talk about?’
‘Nah’ Ben smiled weakly, walking with his hands in his pockets. ‘I’m good.’
‘You should eat something’ Aubrey told him firmly. ‘Don’t think I haven’t notice.’
‘Ha’ Ben breathed. ‘Alright then.’
‘Let’s go to the canteen first and get something for both of us.’
‘Sure.’

Chapter Thirteen

It was many weeks later, that Haru was well enough to start attending classes again.
He rested his chin on his palm, staring out of the window. His cheeks were still a little flushed. His eyes were out of focus and his mind began to wander. The teacher within the room was silent now, sitting at her desk quietly as the class got on with their work, talking quietly amongst themselves.
‘Did you hear about the ghost girl?’
Haru glanced tiredly towards a small group of students gathered together a short distance away, they were speaking quietly, but Haru heard their words.
‘What ghost girl?’ one of them whispered.
‘She’s been hanging around the grounds of the school’ the other replied. ‘They’re saying she’s the ghost of the girl who went missing around the cliffs near here.’
‘A ghost? That’s ridiculous.’
Haru let out a sigh, turning his attention away, back out of the window.

‘I heard about her’ Ben said to Haru when he mentioned it in passing a time later. ‘The shops around here have her picture, you know...one of those missing person posters?’
‘Its very sad’ Haru mumbled. ‘You think she....’
‘What?’ Ben asked.
‘Well...’ Haru went on, ‘you think the ghost really is her?’
‘A ghost?’ Ben asked.
‘People are talking about her, and I’ve seen her.’
‘You’ve seen a ghost’ Ben said flatly.
‘Yes. I mean.... I think so.’
‘Haru. You must know that ghosts aren’t real.’
‘I don’t know that. How can anyone be sure that they’re not?’
‘No one’s ever proved a ghost to be real. No’ Ben said turning away, ‘they’re all just hoaxes.’
Haru sighed in disappointement, feeling his spirit dampen a little.
‘Where is Sasha?’ Haru asked.
‘I don’t know.’
‘And Aubrey?’
‘In detention again.’
Haru sighed.
They sat in the drama hall together, on chairs they had pulled up before the stage.
They sat quietly now, in a peaceful but sad silence.
The hall around them felt so empty now, desolate.
‘I miss her’ Haru spoke up before he was able to stop himself.
‘Yeah’ Ben replied, speaking quietly. ‘Me too.’

Haru went to his dormitory late, after wasting time with Ben. They didn’t do anything, just shared each other’s company.
When Haru returned to his room, he found Nate sitting upon the bed.
‘Oh hey, there you are’ Nate said. ‘Are you alright?’
‘Yeah’ Haru mumbled. ‘I’m fine.’
He sat on his bed, dumping his bag on the floor.
Haru sat there in silence for a time, before looking up.
‘What have you got there?’
‘Its just a camera’ Nate replied.
‘Oh right.’
‘I love taking pictures, I don’t want to show off’ he smirked then, ‘but I’m pretty good actually.’
‘Oh right.’
‘Are you feeling ok?’
‘No actually I.....’ Haru sighed then, hand going to his head.
‘You’re feeling sick again?’
‘A little....’ Haru mumbled. ‘Yeah.’
‘Do you want me to get a nurse?’

‘No thanks.... I think I’ll be alright. I just need to rest.’
‘You must be stressed.’
‘No’ Haru sighed again, ‘I just.... feel really anxious. My heart...’ he said rubbing his chest hard, ‘...its always skipping.’
‘Are you sure you don’t want a nurse?’
‘I’m fine’ Haru said to him. ‘I mean... I’m not but... I don’t want.... uh.....’
‘Alright’ Nate said. ‘You can tell me if you want anything. I’ll get it for you.’
‘Thanks.’ Haru bowed his head then, touching his brow.
I feel like I’m going to be sick.
‘I’m going to sleep now’ Haru said turning and lying on his side on the bed.
‘Sure man’ Nate mumbled, watching him closely.
Haru blinked slowly, closing his eyes.
He felt exhausted.

It was late in the night now, well past the time when everyone else had gone to bed. But there was one person still awake, moving across the grounds of the school, completely concealed by the darkness, he was near enough invisible.
Aubrey reached the base of the building of the male dormitories, right below the window of Haru’s room. He had to scan the side of the building a few times to make sure he got the right one, and when he was sure, he began to climb.
It was gruelling, and dangerous in the dark, but this did not phase him. As he had done before, he climbed up the side of the building, carefully, reaching the ledge of the window well above the ground. He tapped on the glass several times.
Nate woke abruptly, turning towards the window and blinking wearily, squinting in confusion at Aubrey hanging onto the ledge outside.
Nate rose from his bed, moving over to the window and opening it.
‘What the hell are you doing?’ he asked tiredly.
‘Hey where did Haru go?’ Aubrey asked casually.
‘He said he couldn’t sleep’ Nate replied. ‘He’s gone to the music hall.’
‘The music hall?’ Aubrey repeated. ‘Why?’
‘Who are you anyway?’ Nate countered without answering the questing. ‘You know what? It doesn’t matter. Get in here before you fall.’
‘I’m actually alright’ Aubrey replied casually.
‘Get in here’ Nate spoke angrily.
Aubrey clambered through the window awkwardly, straightening once he was inside.
‘Nice room’ he said.
‘They’re all the same man’ Nate frowned. ‘What the hell are you doing climbing the walls in the dead of night?’
‘I was looking for Haru.’
‘What, you couldn’t use a door?’

‘Well I’m not technically allowed in this building at night. My dorms are in another building.’
‘Ok?’ Nate replied in confusion.
‘But I could get out easy. The doors open from the inside you see. You have to press a button or whatever.’
‘Ok well.... are you going to leave now?’
‘Well yes, Haru’s not here so.....’
‘Ok then you can go now’ Nate said irritated. ‘Its late man and I’m going back to bed.’
Nate crawled back into his warm bed as Aubrey crossed the room.
He left that dormitory, glancing about the hall in case the matron was around, but the halls were silent.
He crept silently, moving fast.
It was sort of exciting for him, overshadowed by the fear of being caught, and being out here at night when all else was silent. It made him happy. The place looked so different at night.
Aubrey reached the ground floor, pressing the button on the inside. The door unlocked, buzzing at it did and Aubrey slipped out, back into the cool night.
He moved across the grounds towards the other building, to where the music classes where, and the halls where the larger bands at times played together. He felt a twinge of sadness then, remembering how Amelia used to practice here. She used to play the flute, and the violin also. She had been excellent at both, despite having only picked up the violin recently.
Aubrey stopped in his tracks suddenly then, hearing a distant sound.
‘What is that?’ he mumbled to himself. ‘Music?’
Aubrey hesitated for a moment, glancing down the corridor, before taking a step forwards, closer to the sound. He moved forwards through the deserted halls, which were lit only by very dim lights running along the walls.
Aubrey reached the double doors at the end of the hall, pausing before them for just a brief second, before pushing one of them open.
He was stopped dead in his tracks, as the music flowed through him, touching his heart.
It was heavenly.
As his mind began to focus, he saw the grand piano in the corner of the hall, a lamp sitting upon its surface shone brightly, lighting up everything around it in a warm glow.
Aubrey stared, awestruck by the beauty of the sounds, the melody light and happy and pure.
He watched as Haru played, head down in concentration, he had not noticed Aubrey enter.
Aubrey closed his mouth, gritting his teeth and swallowing, staring with eyes wide. He was captivated.
For the briefest of moments, nothing else existed in the world. Only Aubrey, Haru and the music, it was just the two of them, within this light, the darkness beyond.
It was just the two of them now, suddenly separated in their own new world.
Haru’s fingers ran smoothly over the keys, flawlessly, his movements fluid.
He kept his head down as he continued to play, and as he did, there was a smile upon his face, and warmth in his eyes. He was in solace.
The last note played, hanging in the air.
And then silence.
Aubrey let out his breath then, not realising he had been holding it.

His shoulders slumped, and he stood there, unable to move.
His heart beat in his chest, and something moved inside of him, something stirred.
It was love.

Chapter Fourteen

Haru glanced up, giving a slight gasp as he suddenly noticed Aubrey there in the doorway.
'A-Aubrey' he fumbled, rising quickly to his feet, 'I just.... I-I didn't see you there.'
Aubrey slowly closed the door behind him, approaching Haru, the floor of the hall was pure white, reflecting Aubrey's profile.
'What are you doing here?' Haru asked him.
'I came to find you.'
'Were you crying?'
'That was beautiful.'
'Hu?' Haru blinked in confusion.
'I didn't realise you could play so beautifully.'
'Oh' Haru said. 'Well, I've been practicing all my life. I love to play. The violin too....um.... it just....' he laughed awkwardly then. 'It makes me happy. I like to draw as well.'
'I didn't know.'
Haru stared back at him, eyes wide.
Aubrey glanced away then awkwardly.
'I um' Aubrey began, 'ah jeez I've lost my words now' he laughed, suddenly flustered, shifting and scratching the back of his head. 'That's weird' he said to himself. 'I've never been embarrassed like this before.'
'What?' Haru said.
'I'm sorry' Aubrey straightened then, lowering his arm and looking back at Haru now. 'I just wanted to see you, but you weren't in your room.'
'You really are awkward' Haru smiled.
'What?'
'I've never seen you like this before' Haru giggled behind his hand, 'it's really sweet.'
Aubrey swallowed nervously, cheeks flushing a little.
'Stop it' he mumbled, glancing away.
'I'm sorry.'
Aubrey looked back at Haru.
'I'm kinda jealous of you' Aubrey said. 'I don't really have any talent in anything. I couldn't do what you can do.'
They went outside after that, walking through the peaceful night together.

‘I love this’ Haru sighed then, slowing to a stop as he tilted his head up towards the sky. ‘Its so different at night, like we’re in another place entirely.’
The clouds were thick overhead, keeping the warmth over the earth. There were no stars that could be seen, but the moon shone faintly through the clouds.
‘I love the moon’ Haru said. ‘Its so pretty, like a lantern in the sky. I like the sun but.... you can’t look at it because its so bright. The moon is different, they are like twins to one another, so similar yet so different.’
‘What are you talking about?’ Aubrey laughed.
‘Oh, its nothing really’ Haru grinned sheepishly at himself, hunching his shoulders. ‘Its just a story my mother told me once.’
‘You don’t talk about your family much.’
‘No’ Haru said. ‘I am an only child, and the only family I have now is my father. My mother....’ he frowned slightly to himself then, ‘I miss her so much, but....’ Haru fell silent for a moment. ‘I don’t have any siblings, I wish I did. It would have been nice to have some company.’
Aubrey listened silently, watching him out of the corner of his eye.
‘I don’t get on with my father’ Haru went on, ‘he just.... he doesn’t love me.’
‘Yeah’ Aubrey laughed humourlessly. ‘I know how that feels.’
‘My mother loved me so much, and I loved her so much too. I just miss her so much.’ Haru bowed his head then, brow furrowed. ‘Do you think she’s in the same place as Amelia?’
Aubrey looked away then, eyes half-closed. ‘I don’t know.’
‘You do have talent by the way’ Haru spoke suddenly.’
‘What do you mean?’
‘Earlier you said you have no talent, but when I first saw you perform on stage, the day you first introduced me to your friends.....well....’ he glanced away, ‘it was amazing. You really took my breath away.’
‘Did I?’
‘Why do you sound so surprised?’
‘I never really thought I was that good.’
‘That’s the thing’ Haru said. ‘You are so confident, and uh.... well it was just so amazing for me. You were able to act with such ease, and you were so bold. You are always so bold. That is why I am jealous of you, and when you said you were jealous of me... it was just so weird for me.’
‘Was it?’ Aubrey laughed. ‘You play so beautifully. I couldn’t do anything like that.’
‘Of course you could’ Haru beamed. ‘You just need to practice.’
Aubrey grinned at him, eyes bright and warm. ‘You’re funny.’
‘Am I? Why? What did I say?’ Haru fumbled awkwardly then, flushing slightly.
‘No’ Aubrey smiled, ‘its nothing you said, its just.... you’re just funny.’
‘Oh right’ Haru clenched his fists, before relaxing again.
‘Anyway’ Aubrey said. ‘I just came to your room to see if you were alright. I didn’t get to see you earlier today.’
‘Ben told me you were in detention.’
‘Yeah’ Aubrey laughed.
‘You’re going to get expelled’ Haru spoke firmly now. ‘It’s not good.’

‘Hey what’s that?’ Aubrey spoke then, seeing something a distance away on the edge of the treeline.
‘It’s the ghost’ Haru blurted.
‘Ghost?’
Haru ran forwards past Aubrey then, leaving him behind.
‘Hey wait for me!’
Haru ran forwards, moving a little way into the trees, but not too far, because he could see nothing here. It was pitch black.
‘Where did she go?’ Haru mumbled glancing about.
‘What was that?’ Aubrey asked, catching up to him.
‘It’s a ghost’ Haru answered. ‘I’ve been seeing her for ages.’
Aubrey gave Haru a confused expression but didn’t question him.
They stood side by side, staring into the forest.
‘It’s kinda scary in here’ Haru uttered then.
‘It’s ok’ Aubrey laughed then. ‘Its not like a ghost can hurt you. They’re transparent. They don’t have any mass.’
Haru smiled at him briefly, before his smile faltered.
‘I wonder where Sasha is’ Haru mumbled then. ‘I’ve hardly seen her.’
‘Yeah’ Aubrey said. ‘Same here.’

They found her the next day. After lessons at midday, Aubrey and Haru met up at lunchtime, heading outside together towards the grounds.
‘There she is’ Haru gasped, freezing suddenly before starting forwards.
‘Hey wait’ Aubrey called out, running after him.
Haru made his way across the grounds, to the same spot where he had stood up against the bully who was threatening Kyle previously, that felt like years ago now.
Haru slowed to a stop, seeing Sasha kneeling on the grass before the flowerbed at the edge of the field.
Sasha turned, seeing the shadow falling over her.
‘Oh Haru’ Sasha mumbled. ‘You’re here.’
‘What are you doing?’ Haru asked her, as Aubrey appeared behind him, catching up.
‘Oh’ Sasha spoke distractedly, looking away again, ‘nothing really.’
‘Are you planting the purple tulips still?’ Haru asked her.
‘Yeah’ Sasha smiled up at him, though her smile was weak, and she looked incredibly tired.
‘I just want to do it. I can’t explain it... but I just feel like I should.’
‘I think its nice’ Haru smiled, tears running down his cheeks now.
‘Oh Haru’ Aubrey sighed, grasping his shoulder gently in a comforting gesture.
‘Its ok’ Sasha uttered. ‘At least I know she’s not suffering anymore.’
Aubrey and Haru watched her silently.
‘I can’t cry’ Sasha gasped then, ‘she would not have wanted me to cry, she would have wanted us to be happy....to keep on living...’

Haru felt his heart twist in his chest then, a sudden wave of sadness washing over him, and as he blinked back his own tears, he saw a single tear run down Sasha's cheek.
But Sasha wiped it away quickly.
'No one knows why she did it' Sasha spoke in a hushed voice, 'but her diary revealed how unhappy she was for the longest time, and she kept that pain away from all of us...even me.'
The silence stretched on as Aubrey and Haru watched her.
'Sometimes' Sasha went on, '.... despite your best efforts...there really is nothing you can do.'
'That's not true' Haru spoke up defiantly, 'everyone can be helped, everyone.... but I....you have to open up to people. People care and... uh.... there is always a light in dark places...always.... even in the darkest of places...' Haru broke off then, unable to continue speaking, as he cried silently into his hands.
Aubrey put his arm around him.
'Its alright Haru' he mumbled, holding him. 'Ah shit' he said then letting go of Haru. 'The teacher's looking for me... I gotta go.'
He ran away then without further explanation, heading further away from the buildings and towards the trees some distance away.
'That fool' Sasha spoke quietly looking after him. But this time, there was a smile upon her face. 'You know...' she said, 'school is not going to last forever. I'm going to miss these times we have together.'
'Yeah' Haru mumbled, rubbing his eyes tenderly. 'Me too.'
'I'm glad we're alone actually' Sasha said. 'I feel like... I can really talk to you properly, since you.... you know..... know my secret.'
'Only because Amelia told me' Haru smiled shyly, hunching his shoulders and scratching the back of his head. 'And besides, you know mine.'
Sasha smiled.
'The flowers look really nice' Haru told her.
'Yeah' she said looking back at them. 'They do, don't they?' she fell silent, eyes becoming distant. 'I hope Amelia has found a sort of peace' she mumbled, in a voice barely audible. 'I hope....'
Haru blinked then, staring down at her.
Around them the grounds were hushed.

Chapter Fifteen

In the days that followed, Sasha and Haru spent more and more time together, growing closer. They needed each other, now more than they did before. Sasha after suffering such a loss in her life opened up to Haru. And Haru, having lost his mother whom he had loved dearly, helped her come to terms with what had happened. With Haru's help, Sasha's heart slowly began to mend.

‘Thank you’ Sasha said to Haru several weeks later. ‘I.... I don’t know where I would be now if it were not for you. You’ve helped me so much.’
‘I haven’t really done anything’ Haru grinned.
He felt so relaxed around her, and he had enjoyed the time they had spent together alone.
‘You understand my feelings in a way no one else has’ Sasha mumbled, ‘not my own family.... only Amelia.’
‘Yeah’ Haru mumbled, facing ahead again and leaning forwards on his knees.
They sat on a bench side by side. It was lunchtime, and the day around them was bright and peaceful.
‘Do you still miss your mother?’ Sasha said to Haru then. ‘Even though she’s been gone for years?’
‘Of course I do’ Haru smiled weakly. ‘I miss her so much.... it hurts me even now.’ He let out a sigh, hanging his head. ‘She died of an illness, the same illness I....’ he frowned then. ‘I am physically weak like she was’ Haru said. ‘I wish I wasn’t weak. But she was strong in other ways, her personality.... she was always kind, always. She was never unkind to anyone, and always so kind and forgiving. But she had a fire in her soul, she was passionate. She had such a strong personality and worked hard to chase her dreams.’
‘What were her dreams?’ Sasha asked.
‘She was musically gifted’ Haru replied. ‘I learned the piano and violin from her, and continued to practice after she had died.’
‘That’s really sweet’ Sasha said to him.
‘Yeah. I remember we used to practice together. My father would get angry about the noise, I was terrified of him, but she was strong. She would stand up to him. They came together purely for uh...business and money purposes. They never loved each other. I never really had much to do with my father, and rarely saw him. But my mother always cared for me, she never even raised her voice to me. Not once.’ Haru smiled at the memory. ‘I looked up to her. I loved her so much. And I admired her.’
‘What was she like?’ Sasha asked.
‘She was a lot like me’ Haru replied. ‘I mean.... I’m a lot like she was, I am more like my mother than my father. I am nothing like my father.’
‘You don’t talk about your father at all’ Sasha noted then. ‘Why?’
‘I don’t like him’ Haru mumbled. ‘He doesn’t care for me.’
‘What do you mean?’
Haru frowned, hunching his shoulders. ‘My father has a lot of money’ Haru said, ‘a *lot* of money. He cares only for his business, and of money. He... he... uh...’
‘What it is?’
‘Please don’t tell anyone’ Haru blurted, gritting his teeth and beginning to cry then.
‘Oh Haru’ Sasha spoke softly, ‘what is it?’
‘I’m sorry’ Haru whispered. ‘I shouldn’t be like this. I have to control myself. I have to control myself.’
He took a deep breath, then another. Several times until he calmed himself.
‘I am engaged’ Haru spoke, ‘to a girl. Her name is Jasmine.’
‘You’re engaged?’

‘Yeah’ Haru said mournfully. ‘I barely know her. I’ve met her only a few times, but this arrangement.... it’s all planned by my father. This is an arranged marriage, because of business purposes, like how my parents married. I am an only child, so I am important to my father, but only as a piece to use. My father wants Jasmine and I to marry, because of money, but I do not love her.’ Haru clasped his hands together, staring down at his lap sadly. ‘I love Aubrey. I want us to be together, but Aubrey does not feel that way. He wants... he.... only likes girls.’ Haru hung his head, sighing then. ‘I’m so conflicted. Inside I....’ he breathed a deep and slow breath. ‘I love Aubrey, from the very first moment I saw him perform onstage, he took my breath away. I was....’ Haru stared, eyes wide and out of focus as his mind was cast back. ‘I fell in love with him that day, and so much time has passed since then, and I still feel the same.... no..... its stronger now, but I am afraid, I have to accept that he may never love me, as Amelia told me. He may never feel that way towards me, but I am honoured to have him as a friend.’ He smiled then, a genuine smile. ‘I am happy’ he spoke quietly.
‘I’m glad’ Sasha voiced. ‘The only times I feel happy now are when I am with you.’
They glanced towards each other, their eyes meeting, as love and understanding passed between them, they had become such close friends now.
‘Thank you’ Haru said to her.
‘For what?’
‘Nothing’ Haru shrugged. ‘Everything.’ He frowned to himself.
‘You’re still as awkward as ever’ Sasha said off-handedly.
‘Yeah’ Haru agreed, ‘but I’m getting better.’
He thought back to his mother then, the most cherished memories he had were of her.
‘My mother was always kind to me’ Haru spoke. ‘It hurts me that I’ve lost her, but I will always remember the good times we had together. She would want me to live a good life, a happy life.’
‘Yeah’ Sasha said. ‘Amelia would have wanted the same.’

‘Hey guys!’
Sasha turned with a glare towards Aubrey who had appeared suddenly, Ben was behind him.
‘Don’t yell at me!’ Sasha snapped back.
Sasha and Haru had been sitting in a peaceful and comfortable silence up until that point.
‘Aubrey was in detention again’ Ben said to them, walking forwards with his hands in his pockets.
‘Again?’ Sasha groaned. ‘How....how have you not been expelled yet?’
‘Its only a matter of time’ Ben frowned at Aubrey. ‘I’ve already spoken to him about this, but he just won’t listen.’
Haru raised his head silently, staring at Aubrey mournfully, though he kept his mouth shut.
‘Do you *want* to go back home?’ Sasha asked Aubrey.
‘Of course not’ Aubrey scowled, annoyed then at the thought of his home and parents. ‘I hate it there.’
‘Then why are you risking being expelled? You know its only a matter of time if you carry on this way.’
‘But I’m a delinquent’ Aubrey grinned happily at her. ‘I don’t take well with...you know... all of this’ he indicated around him. ‘This boarding school is like a prison, I hate it here.’

Aubrey sighed and turned away, breaking off.
‘Hey’ he added suddenly, looking back at Sasha and Haru, ‘you guys look like a couple.’
Haru gasped then, flustered and suddenly embarrassed.
‘You guys would make a great couple now that I think about it’ Aubrey went on, speaking to Sasha and Haru. ‘You guys should get married and have thirty-three babies together.’
‘Why thirty-three?’ Sasha raised an eyebrow.
‘It was a fairy-tail reference’ Aubrey grinned.
Haru looked across the grounds as the others began to talk together, he saw a familiar figure.
‘It’s that girl again’ Haru mumbled, but the others didn’t hear him.

They went their separate ways after that once classes had started, Haru attended his class, but was given permission to leave early when he began to feel ill.
He walked down the corridor slowly, cheeks flushed and feeling a little dizzy.
Haru walked slowly, pausing at the vending machine along the way to get a drink.
‘Its you again’ came an unfriendly voice.
Haru turned to see a figure he recognised, one of Kyle’s friends.
‘Leave him alone’ Kyle said to him, following behind as he walked along the corridor.
‘What?’ the friend said, glancing back at Kyle.
‘Go’ Kyle said, ‘I want to talk to Haru.’
‘Why?’
‘Just go’ Kyle said angrily then, ‘I’ll meet you outside.’
The friend scowled at that, turning sulkily and walking away.
‘He still doesn’t like you’ Kyle remarked, speaking to Haru then.
‘But why?’ Haru mumbled. ‘What did I do?’
‘It wasn’t anything you did’ Kyle replied. ‘You’re just a weak and easy target.’
Kyle turned to face him then, looking away from his friend once he was out of sight.
‘You don’t so good.’
‘No’ Haru mumbled. ‘I get sick sometimes. I think its just stress.’
‘What are you stressed about?’
‘Well....’ Haru hunched his shoulders.
‘Is it Aubrey?’ Kyle offered.
‘Partly’ Haru mumbled. ‘Its also.... well I know its been a few weeks but.... its just been so hard. She died right in front of me.’
‘So its true then’ Kyle said to him. ‘I had heard rumours.’
‘Yeah well.... I try to be positive.... its just hard now because Sasha is all alone.... I mean uh...’ he added hastily, beginning to panic.
‘Is that her friend?’ Kyle asked.
‘Uh...’ Haru said, ‘yeah’ he laughed awkwardly. ‘We’ve all lost someone we cared about that day.’
‘So, what about Aubrey?’ Kyle asked him.
‘What do you mean?’
‘Have you told him how you feel?’
‘No’ Haru groaned, staring at his feet now. ‘I can’t.’

‘You have to do it one day, or maybe you don’t’ Kyle shrugged, ‘its not my business but... nothing will happen if you keep your mouth shut. You’ll never know what might have been.’
‘Yeah’ Haru sighed, ‘I guess you’re right.’
‘How come you’re not in class?’
‘I’m feeling unwell’ Haru told him, ‘and you?’
‘Skiving.’
Haru laughed quietly to himself.
‘Well, if anyone asks I haven’t seen you’ Haru said.
‘Appreciated. Well then’ Kyle said turning away. ‘Bye.’
‘Yeah’ Haru mumbled to the air, watching him go. ‘Bye...’
He took his drink from the vending machine, drinking it quickly before throwing it away.
He headed outside now, wanting to go to his dormitory and just rest in bed.
But then he saw something.
‘Its that girl again’ he mumbled.
Haru gritted his teeth, staring at her. She just stood there at the edges of the grounds, simply standing, simply watching.
What is she? Is she even real?
Haru clutched his bag tighter to him, making his way over to her, jogging across the grounds towards her.
He had seen her so often. He wanted to speak to her at last, after all this time, and find out who she really was.

Haru was gasping and panting by the time he finally reached her, his cheeks flushed.
The girl stared at him timidly, hiding behind a tree. She looked like she was about to flee.
‘No’ Haru gasped, reaching out to her, ‘please don’t go.’
‘Who are you?’ the young girl said, she looked to be about fourteen.
‘My name is Haru’ he said straightening, ‘I’m sorry’ he gasped, hand going to his head, ‘I don’t feel well.’
‘You look sick.’
‘I think I have a fever’ Haru uttered, lowering his hand and lifting his head again. ‘I’ll be alright.’
Haru looked to her again.
‘I don’t recognise you’ Haru said, ‘you’re not a student from this school.’
‘No’ the girl uttered. ‘I’m not.’
‘Are you a ghost?’
‘Hu?’ the girl blinked, eyes wide then. ‘A ghost?’
‘There’s rumours going about the school, about a ghost-girl wandering the grounds. Is that you?’
‘A ghost girl?’
‘Are you real?’

‘Of course I am real’ the girl replied. ‘I am not a ghost.’
‘Are you the girl who went missing around the cliffs?’ Haru asked.
‘No’ she replied. ‘I am not that person. That person is dead.’
‘How do you know?’
‘She’s been missing for weeks’ she said. ‘She’s dead. Just think about it logically.’
‘Don’t you think there is a chance for a happy ending?’ Haru asked.
‘No.’
‘Why?’ Haru asked sadly.
‘Please, she’s been missing for weeks. It was an accident. She fell. She’s gone. This has happened before. The cliffs are a very dangerous place, she has not been the first, and she won’t be the last.’
Haru bowed his head, feeling sad and dejected.
‘If you’re not a student’ Haru said to her speaking slowly, ‘and you’re not a ghost, then who are you, and what are you doing here?’
‘My name is Harley’ the young girl said, ‘and I came here to find my sister.’
‘I don’t understand’ Haru answered. ‘Why have you been.... uh....’
‘I’ve been too scared to come closer’ Harley admitted, averting her gaze then.
Haru stared at her with wide eyes.
‘Something’s wrong’ he uttered, speaking softly to her. ‘What is it?’
‘What do you mean?’
‘You’re scared to speak to your own sister, even though you want to. Why? What’s holding you back?’
Harley gritted her teeth, hunching her shoulders uncertainly.
‘I’ve seen that look before’ Haru mumbled, though she heard him clearly. ‘You’re in pain.’
‘Is it really that obvious?’ she asked sadly.
‘Yes. I’m sorry.’
‘I want to talk to my sister, she is my life but.... I am afraid, we’ve been apart for too long.... an I am afraid to face her after what’s happened.’
Haru stared at her hard, analysing her.
‘Something’s happened to you’ he spoke slowly, brow furrowed, ‘you.... why were you separated from your sister?’
Harley looked back at Haru, and there were tears in her eyes, though she was smiling.
‘I’m afraid to talk about it, I am ashamed.’
‘Ashamed? Why ashamed?’ Haru said, picking up on this word instantly. ‘Someone’s hurt you’ Haru said, speaking as he thought. ‘Someone’s hurt you and you blame yourself.’
‘Stop it!’ Harley snapped suddenly, catching Haru off-guard. ‘Don’t try to analyse me!’
Haru fell quickly silent, shocked at her outburst.
‘This just isn’t fair’ Harley whimpered then, speaking to the ground, ‘I didn’t deserve any of this. My sister didn’t deserve any of this. I know now she was protecting me for so long....but I didn’t realise until...’
She stopped herself, unable to continue.
Haru could see the pain in her, as she fought to control her emotions. Haru’s attention drifted down to her clothes then. From a distance, in the light of the moon and sun that had shone down on her when he had seen her before, they looked like they had glowed white, like a

ghost. But coming closer now, Haru saw that the modest, knee-high dress was actually pale blue.
'Listen' Haru began tentatively, 'I don't want to speak out of place, and I know its not my business but... my friend.... recently committed suicide. It was... very sudden and without warning. We were all shocked, we have no idea she was so unhappy, she hid it so well...'
Haru swallowed the lump in his throat, tears brimming in his eyes.
'My point is' Haru went on, 'don't.....uh.....I'm no good at this. I guess what I'm trying to say is that life is precious and fleeting, life is fragile and.... if you waste time dwelling and thinking about what you want to do.... instead of actually doing it, then you might never get the opportunity.'
Haru gasped suddenly to himself, suddenly realising his own words.
What am I saying? This is exactly how I feel towards Aubrey.
'I guess you're right' Harley sighed, having not seemed to notice Haru's reaction. 'You see the truth is, my father..... he separated me and my sister, and um.....'
'Its ok' Haru spoke kindly, 'I understand.'
'You see the truth is.... uh' Harley went on, but it was clear in her tone that she was very reluctant to talk. 'My sister suffered horrible abuse from my father for a very long time' she spoke in a murmur, 'and I didn't realise' Harley said, 'not until she was taken away from home. Not until she was brought here. I was left home alone with my father.'
'Did he hurt you?' Haru asked.
'Yes' Harley whispered. 'He...' Harley breathed, 'touched me. He comes into my room at night.' Tears ran down her cheeks now as she spoke. 'I didn't realise how long my sister was protecting me until she was sent away. When I grew up a little, my father...' she broke off, gritting her teeth. 'It was difficult' she whispered, 'but I managed to gain enough courage to run away. I found my step brother, my father's son after that, and he took me in, which is where I am staying now, but so far, I have been too afraid to approach my sister.... because of everything that's happened. I didn't realise how she suffered for so long, I feel guilty for it, I should have seen, but I was young and blind. I was...horrified when I found out. She would be horrified to find out that she couldn't protect me. She would be horrified to find out....to know what has happened.'
'You have to tell her' Haru spoke sincerely. 'You have to. She would want to see you I'm sure.'
'For years we were close' Harley said. 'But so much time has passed.'
'Talk to her' Haru said, 'do it now while you can.'
'I want to' Harley breathed. 'But I don't know what class she is in, I haven't seen her, but I know this is the school she goes to. No' she corrected herself. 'I have seen her once.... but I was too afraid to speak to her… too afraid to approach her.'
'My friends are all in different classes' Haru offered. 'If you tell me her name, I'm sure one of them will know her, one of them is probably in her class. We could help you two meet.'
'I want that' Harley breathed, glancing up at Haru with teary eyes. 'I want to meet her so badly, then I will leave this place with her. My brother and I... with my sister.... we will all travel the distance to meet our mother, my step brother has never met our mother but... I want us all to be a family, together as we were supposed to be. I want us all to catch up on the time

we've missed together, as a real family like we should have been, without my father's cruelty.'
'I want to help you' Haru smiled, tears running down his cheeks, his left hand twitched involuntarily as he said this. 'No one deserves to be mistreated. Everyone in this world deserves happiness in their lives.'

The next day at lunchtime, Haru found Aubrey as he was making his way down the corridor having just left class.
'Oh Haru, hey.' Aubrey smiled. 'What are you doing here so early? How did you find me so fast?'
'I knew what class you were in Haru mumbled. 'I was given permission to leave early because I wasn't feeling well.'
'You do look a little flushed' Aubrey told him, stopping and turning to face him. 'Hang on a sec...'
Haru flinched in surprise as Aubrey touched his forehead with a hand.
'Oh waw, you're really hot' Aubrey spoke with concern, drawing his hand back again. 'Maybe you should go to the nurse's office, or to bed. That's a good point, why are you here anyway?' Aubrey asked him. 'Shouldn't you be with your girlfriend?'
'What?' Haru gasped in shock, caught suddenly off-guard. 'G-girlfriend?'
'Yeah' Aubrey smiled at him. 'You know. Sasha? Sasha your girlfriend?'
'S-Sasha's not my girlfriend' Haru fumbled.
'Are you sure?' Aubrey teased. 'You two are such a great couple.'
'We're not a couple' Haru shot indignantly. 'Sasha doesn't like me in that way, and anyway she likes girls.'
'What?'
'What?' Haru frowned, 'oh wait did I just say that.....oh god no I wasn't supposed to say that!?'
'Sasha likes girls?' Aubrey echoed, speaking flatly. 'Are you serious? Are you sure?'
'Please please don't tell Sasha' Haru begged him, grabbing onto the front of his shirt then, 'Please you mustn't tell her, I was supposed to keep that a secret, please Aubrey....she trusted me.'
'Alright alright' Aubrey said, patting his hands and trying to prize Haru's fingers open so that he could free his shirt. 'I won't say anything.'
'Please don't' Haru mumbled, 'please.....ah....'
Haru fell to his knees then, body hunched over.
'Haru!'
Haru groaned, head bowed.
'Haru are you alright?'
'I feel so sick' Haru mumbled.
'Your cheeks are so flushed' Aubrey spoke with concern. 'You should go to the nurse's office' Aubrey spoke. 'You're really not well.'
'No!' Haru spoke defiantly. 'There's something I have to do.'

‘What is that?’
‘The ghost girl.... no....’ Haru gasped, ‘she’s not a ghost...’
‘What are you talking about?’
Haru groaned, rising to his feet again, and forcing himself to stand, though he wobbled on the spot.
‘I spoke to a girl yesterday...’
‘By yourself? I’m surprised you have the courage...’
‘This is serious’ Haru glowered.
‘Ok ok’ Aubrey said, trying to calm him down again. ‘Well what did she say? And who was she?
‘Her name was Harley’ Haru said, forcing himself to talk, ‘and she’s trying to find her sister, the two were separated.’
‘You think you know her?’ Aubrey asked him.
‘No... I don’t’ Haru told him. ‘I’ve asked Sasha and Ben this morning, and they said they don’t know. I wanted to ask you, that’s why I came to find you.’
‘What’s her name?’
‘Her name is Mia. I have to help her find her sister, Harley’s been wanting to meet her for so long. I have to help to make it happen.’
‘Alright’ Aubrey nodded. ‘Actually, that name does ring a bell.’
‘It does?’
‘Yeah’ Aubrey said frowning thoughtfully to himself. ‘She’s that really quiet girl who never talks to anyone. She’s really sour she is, I’m actually quite scared of her.’
‘Do you know where she is?’ Haru asked eagerly.
‘Well not right now. I mean, she’s probably around here somewhere. I know what she looks like...’
‘Please can you find her?’ Haru said grabbing Aubrey by his shoulders. ‘You have to find her now. Her sister is waiting.’
‘Uh....’ Aubrey said uncertainly. ‘Sure. I mean… I guess I can.’
‘Can you do it now?’ Haru urged. ‘Harley is waiting for me.’
‘Ok?’
‘Listen’ Haru said, letting go of Aubrey and taking a step back. ‘I have to go; the others are waiting for me.’
‘The others?’
‘Sasha and Ben’ Haru told him, ‘and Harley as well.’
‘Are you sure you’re alright?’ Aubrey asked him with concern.
‘Yeah really’ Haru smiled back, cheeks still flushed, ‘I’m really happy, I’m really excited.’
He teetered on the spot for a moment, Aubrey watching him closely, taking a step forwards in case he was to fall.
‘I’ll be alright’ Haru said, hand going to his head only briefly before he looked up again. ‘Find Mia’ Haru spoke tenderly. ‘I’ll be outside with the others, I have to speak to Harley.’
Aubrey was about to call out to Haru, but Haru had already turned away, beginning to walk, before breaking into a jog and heading outside.
Aubrey stared after him, lowering his hand.
He felt more than a little confused.

Haru met Sasha, Ben and Harley outside by the bench on the edge of the field. Harley was standing nervously there, clutching her hands together before her. She had already been introduced to Sasha and Ben by Haru, who had told them about Harley earlier that day. Aubrey had been in detention.
'Haru' Harley gasped, as he slowed to a stop before them.
'Are you alright?' Sasha asked immediately, unfolding her arms and turning to Haru with an expression of concern. 'You don't look well.'
'No, its fine' Haru waved her away, straightening up again and speaking to Harley now. 'Aubrey says he knows your sister' he told her. 'He's bringing her here now.'

Aubrey ran through the halls, checking the club activity rooms and the canteen. He eventually found Mia sitting with a small group of friends, tucked away in a corner beneath the stairs.
'Excuse me' Aubrey grinned, stepping between the girls and bending down the grab Mia's wrist not so subtly, 'I need to borrow this.'
'What are you doing?' she snapped angrily at him.
'Trust me' he said back to her, pulling her to her feet.
'Aubrey, let go.'
'Do you trust me?' he asked her.
'No.'
'Ok' he said flatly, 'I guess I asked for that.'
'Let go of me' she said to him impatiently.
'I have to show you something, you're going to love this.'
'What?' she raised an eyebrow, glancing down at her wrist that Aubrey still held before looking back up at him.
'I have to show you something' Aubrey breathed. 'Can I take you away from your friends?'
Aubrey looked down to the girls surrounding them, watching him with confused expressions. Mia caught the eye of one of the girls, who gave her an encouraging nod.
Mia pursed her lips, turning back to Aubrey with distain.
'Fine' she said shortly.
'Great' Aubrey grinned. 'Let's go.'
He pulled her with him, dragging her along the corridor, taking her away from her friends.
'Where are you taking me?' she asked sourly.
'I have to show you something' Aubrey spoke back to her excitedly. 'You're going to love it.'
'You keep saying that. And you don't have to hold my wrist.'
'Just shush and trust me.'
Aubrey took her outside, pausing for only a moment and glancing about. He saw the others waiting for him across the field. Sasha raised her hand, waving at Aubrey, and he started towards her, still pulling Mia with him.
He slowed only when he drew closer to them, finally letting go of Mia.

‘You found her’ Haru breathed.
‘Where is she?’ Aubrey said back.
Haru turned and glanced away, looking now towards the collection of trees a short distance from them.
Beside them Mia tilted her head, pursing her lips and glaring.
A figure stepped out from behind one of the trees, closely followed by a second figure.
Mia’s eyes suddenly widened then, and she screamed, hands clapped over her mouth.
Harley took another step forward, tears already streaming down her cheeks, unable to hold back her emotions as she slowly closed the gap between herself and her sister. The figure behind her, a tall male figure with dark blue-dyed hair, waited at a distance. The stepbrother.
‘Harley?’ Mai sobbed, hunching her shoulders as she began to cry too, ‘is it really you?’
Mia rushed up to her sister, embracing her, grasping onto her tightly as if she was afraid that she might lose her if she were to let her go.
Sasha put her hand to her chest, beginning to tear up as she watched. Ben and Aubrey and Haru around her watched silently, and Haru too began to cry.
‘I’m sorry’ Mia gasped to her sister, letting her go now, cupping her face. ‘I’m sorry I did everything I could to protect you.’
‘I know’ Harley sobbed, crying with tears of both joy and grief. ‘I know now everything you did for me all those years.’
Mia’s eyes widened then as she read between the lines, thinking hard about her words. Mia bowed her head, crying openly now as she realised the truth.
‘It’s ok Mia’ Harley breathed, lifting her sisters head up, hands trembling, awash with emotion. ‘That’s in the past now. I want to forget about it, and only to move forward. It was hard but I managed to escape, I found Luke and....now that I have you...’ she caressed Mia’s cheek then, smiling through her tears. ‘We’re going to leave it all behind now. We’re going back to find our mother. Luke has been looking after me’ she said, glancing back at the blue-haired young man behind them, the stepbrother. ‘I’ve been staying with him.’
Mia looked past Harley towards Luke then, smiling at her stepbrother.
‘Its good to see you again’ she gasped, speaking through her tears.
‘You too’ he smiled back at her. ‘I’m glad you’re alright.’
‘So, what are you going to do?’ Aubrey voiced, speaking to Mia then.
‘I’m going to leave’ Mai said. ‘I’m going to leave this school as soon as I can. I want to be with my family, but not my father. I want to see my mother again, but I’m glad I found my sister, and my brother also. I want to repair the damage that has been done, and to work hard to make things better again.’
Sasha, Ben, Haru and Aubrey watched happily as the three of them walked away, the sisters holding hands, and the stepbrother following after them.
‘That was so touching’ Ben murmured. ‘I’m so happy for them.’
‘Yeah’ Haru smiled weakly, blinking slowly. ‘I saw Harley for so long, it was great to finally speak to her, and to get a happy ending. I love happy endings.’
‘Sasha’s a lesbian’ Aubrey voiced.
There was sudden shocked silence, as everyone stared at Aubrey, who remained perfectly calm.
A few more seconds passed.

Then Sasha's face contorted, and she rounded on Haru, grabbing him by the front of his shirt.
'You idiot you told him!' Sasha screeched.
'Sasha I'm sorry' Haru fumbled, suddenly terrified of her. 'Aubrey!'
'What?' he shrugged casually.
Sasha grabbed Aubrey now, beginning to wrestle with him.
'Guys please' Ben started towards them, trying to break them up.
Haru took a step back, watching tiredly as the three of them scuffled together. His attention drifted then, back across the grounds, he saw one last time, the siblings walking away.

It was just a few weeks later, that Haru was taken out of school, for a short time only.
He was made to return home, by the will of his father.

Chapter Sixteen

Haru sat in his father's office, feeling very uncomfortable. This particular room was smaller than the others in his home, and despite the fact that his father sat behind the great wooden desk, and Haru sat on the low coffee-coloured leather sofa on the other side of the small room, Haru still felt uncomfortably close to his father.
'So....um....' Haru said, balling his fists on his lap and hunching his shoulders. 'W-when is she coming?'
'I already told you' his father replied shortly.
'Oh....ok.'
'When is she coming?' his father asked him patiently.
Haru glanced up at him, eyes wide and heart beating faster in his chest with nerves, palms sweating. His heart skipped uncomfortably in his chest, and Haru struggled to concentrate.
'Um...' Haru swallowed nervously, brow furrowed as he stared at the low coffee table before him. 'Um....I um...'
His heart skipped again in his chest as he heard his father sigh irritably. His father was not a very patient man, and regarded Haru with disatain a lot of the time. His father's name was Philip, and he was always a busy man, short with Haru when he spoke to him. He had never been warm towards him his entire life, not once.
'I um' Haru said again, feeling growing trepidation.
'Stop saying *um'* his father told him. 'Learn to speak properly. Think before you speak.'
'I'm sorry' Haru mumbled.
'Haru' his father said tierdly.
'Hm?' Haru glanced nervously up.
'Sit up straight, lower your shoulders, and speak clearly.'

Haru swallowed again, straightening his back and lowering his shoulders. His posture was still tense.
Philip let out a weary sigh, rising to his feet and walking around the desk.
Haru followed him with his eyes, wide as he stared up at him, never looking away as he turned his head towards him.
'You have to listen to what people tell you.'
'Yes father.'
'Jasmine is coming tomorrow.'
'Yes father' Haru repeated, quickly falling silent.
He stared up at his father nervously, who stared down at him unmoving, for what felt like the longest time.
For a moment Haru thought his father was going to berate him, to pick out his flaws again, to mention again how timid he was, and how undesirable that trait was in him. But he didn't.
'She will be here at three o'clock' his father said, turning quickly away and heading towards the door now, pausing and glancing back. 'You better be nice to her. Make her feel welcome, you understand?'
'I will do that father.' Haru swallowed again, forcing himself to ask the next question. 'When will we be married?'
'I'm still arranging it with her parents' Philip said, 'but it will be in a few months. Soon.'
'Oh good' Haru smiled, 'I am looking forward to it.'
'Good' his father said shortly. 'I have to go.'
He left the room without another word, snapping the door shut behind him, leaving Haru along in the ringing silence.
The edges of Haru's lips lowered then, as the smile slowly fell from his face.
Haru turned away from the door, looking ahead again and slumping in his seat, allowing himself to sit back, the leather creaking slightly was clear to hear in the otherwise silent room.
He could hear nothing at all now, not even the birds outside.
Haru glanced towards the window, seeing blue skies beyond.
The roads and town were beyond the grounds of the manor, and at this point in time Haru could hear only ringing silence.
He felt lonely, and he missed his friends dearly.
I want to be back at school he thought. *I don't want to be here.*

'Where is he?'
'How should I know?' Sasha replied, speaking to Aubrey.
They were both in the library now during lunch, Ben was with them too. He had remained silent most of that day, barely speaking.
'I'm worried about him' Aubrey went on.
'Aubrey' Sasha spoke patiently, glancing up at him from over her book. 'Keep your voice down. We're in a library.'
Aubrey who had been leaning forwards, resting his head on his folded arms looked up at her now, his expression dampening as he gave her the smallest scowl.

‘I’m worried about him’ he said again.
‘I’m sure he’s fine’ Sasha replied, speaking in a level voice. ‘He’s only gone back home.’
‘Hmmm’ Aubrey frowned, unconvinced. ‘He said he doesn’t like his father.’
‘So?’
Beside them, Ben lifted his eyes up at them, glancing at them both silently as they spoke, sitting back in his seat with his book before him.
‘What if his father’s hurting him?’ Aubrey went on.
‘What are you talking about?’ Sasha sighed wearily, closing her book now.
‘He said he doesn’t like his father’ Aubrey said again.
‘So? A lot of people don’t like their family.’
‘Do you think he’s ok?’
‘I’m sure he’s fine Aubrey’ Sasha groaned, fed up now with him.
‘What if he needs help?’
‘If you keep asking me stupid questions and annoying me I’m going to get really pissed off.’
Ben who had been watching them, looked back at his book, continuing to read silently.
‘I’m only caring about him’ Aubrey replied indignantly.
‘I know’ Sasha said, speaking sympathetically now. ‘But there’s nothing we can do. He’s with his family. Its not our place to intervene.’
Aubrey did not reply, but had fallen silent now, eyes out of focus as he leant forwards against the desk.
‘Aubrey?’ Sasha voiced then. ‘Are you alright?’
‘Yeah, I’m fine’ Aubrey mumbled, resting his head on his folded arms again. ‘I’m just thinking.’
That night for the second time, Aubrey snuck into the office where all the student’s records were kept.
The key was easy for him to find, because he knew where it was kept, and so he opened the door without trouble.
He moved very quietly, very carefully. He found Haru’s file, opening it, and moving over toward the window, used the light of the moon to read the details on the front.
Aubrey let out a steady breath, blinking slowly as he read the address of Haru’s home.
‘If you don’t come back to us soon’ he whispered to himself, ‘then I will come and find you instead.’

The next day, Haru met with Jasmine. It had been a long time since they last saw each other, many years in fact, and Haru was trembling with nerves.
He clasped his hands together, trying to stop them from shaking, shoulders hunched as he leant over.
Haru waited on the top of the steps within the garden, down the path he could see the quiet road from where he stood, and he saw as the car pulled up.
Haru swallowed anxiously, lowering his hands and straightening.
He clenched his teeth as he saw the car door opening. His heart skipped in his chest as he saw Jasmine then, getting out of the car and turning to close the door.

Haru waited, watching as Jasmine spoke briefly to the driver, handing him some of the things she carried, a bag and a jumper.
She turned and glanced towards Haru briefly, seeing him standing at the top of the steps. She hesitated then, speaking one last time to the man before nodding. Haru could not hear what was being said. The man nodded in turn to her, and Jasmine moved away from him, stepping forwards and opening the iron gate, stepping along the path closer to Haru.
His nerves only mounted as he watched her approach. She walked carefully up the steps to reach him, never taking her eyes off him, at last stopping by his side.
'Hello Haru. It's been a long time. Its good to see you again.'
As she spoke, there was no warmth in her voice. She did not speak unkindly to him, but spoke almost in a robotic fashion, as if she had been told what she should say to him, and how she should behave.
'Uh....' Haru flushed red then, trying to gather his thought. 'Its g-good to see you too. I'm happy to see you again. Really.'
She blinked at him, unmoving.
'So, um' Haru said, trying not to sound so scared. 'Sh-shall we walk through the garden together?'
'Of course.'
'Right' Haru laughed awkwardly. 'This way' he said, indicating inelegantly.
'Alright.'
'I'll um.... I'll show you my favourite place in the garden, there's a… um.... a secluded spot somewhere near the bottom of the garden. I hope you don't mind the walk' he said to her, leading the way as they made their way back down the steps.
'Of course not' Jasmine spoke in a level voice, holding her hands before her.
'I... used to like playing there when I was younger' Haru told her, trying to think of something to say. 'I haven't been home in a while because of school but.... its a really peaceful place and... I like to just sit there quietly.'
Oh no what if that sounded weird? Haru thought in silent panic to himself. *Did I say the right thing? What if she's scared to be alone with me? Maybe we should stay closer to the house. Why did I say to go somewhere secluded together? I'm such an idiot!*
'So, um...' Haru began, trying quickly to distract himself. 'Ha-have you been to this garden before?
'You know I have' she told him.
'Oh right' Haru laughed. 'Sorry.'
She looked away as they walked.
Haru glanced towards her tentatively, attention lingering on her for only a brief moment, though she didn't seem to notice.
Jasmine was young and beautiful, around the same age as Haru, though he couldn't remember her exact age, and was too afraid to ask. She was a slender figure, with perfect skin. She wore a pretty dress, cream in colour, a V-neck, short sleeves. Her auburn hair was long, left freely to hang over her shoulders, and her eyes were a gentle blue.
Haru slowed to a stop then.
'Haru? Are you alright?' Jasmine said, pausing and turning back to him.
'I uh....' Haru mumbled, 'uh...'

He groaned then, clutching as his chest, his other hand going to his mouth.
'I just....'
His eyes began to shimmer with tears, as he fought to control himself. But he could not.
Haru let out a cry, falling to his knees as he began to gasp and tremble violently, hyperventilating, suddenly hysterical for no reason.
'Haru!'
Jasmine rushed up to him, grasping him tightly by the shoulders.
'Haru what's wrong?!'
'I....' Haru gasped, face going red as he clutched at his chest. 'C.....can't *breathe*...'
A figure rushed up to them, one of the gardeners who happened to be nearby, she had worked in the garden for years, and Haru knew her well.
'It's alright Haru' the young woman said, lifting Haru's chin up so that he could see her face. 'It's alright, just try to be calm, take steady breaths.'
She had seen Haru have panic attacks before and worked on trying to calm him.
Jasmine however, had not known Haru was this weak.
She took a step backwards, eyes wide in shock.
'I'm.....' she uttered weakly, 'going to get help.'
Jasmine turned and ran away, heading towards the manor back down the path.

'What the hell is wrong with you?' his father demanded a short time later.
He had heard Jasmine's panicked voice as she explained to one of the housekeepers what had happened.
He had stormed through the house, outside and found Haru still kneeling, the gardener comforting him.
He had grabbed Haru by his upper arm, dragging him to his feet.
'Philip wait!' the gardener cried out.
'No' Philip snapped angrily, shaking Haru then.
'You're hurting me' Haru groaned, tensing up.
'No, I'm fed up with this' Philip snarled, losing his temper now, 'this is ridiculous.'
He marched back to the house, dragging Haru with him. He took him back up to his office, slamming the door and rounding on Haru.
'What the hell is wrong with you?' his father snarled, speaking in a hushed but clear voice, that Haru could hear.
'I'm sorry...' Haru continued to gasp, eyes red and still clutching at his chest, still gasping, still struggling to breathe.
'Stop it now.'
'I can't' Haru moaned, beginning to panic now. '*Please*!'
'What is wrong?' Philip demanded. 'Why are you like this?'
'I can't help it!' Haru sobbed.
'I'm fucking sick and tired of this' Philip spoke under his breath, moving over to a cupboard and taking out a box of tissues. 'This is really pathetic, you need to stop this' he said handing the box to Haru. 'Its all in your head. There's nothing wrong.'
'I just feel scared' Haru whimpered.

‘There is nothing to be scared about’ Philip raised his voice now, leaning forwards and gesturing angrily with his hands. ‘Will you just cut it out!’
‘I CAN’T HELP IT!’ Haru yelled back at his father.
‘This isn’t the way you should be behaving around Jasmine. You’re supposed to live together and get married.’
‘I don’t love her’ Haru uttered. ‘I.....c-can’t do this.’
‘I don’t care, alright?’ Philip spoke harshly. ‘We’ve made these arrangements and you *will* marry her.’
Haru brought a handful of tissues to his face, crying hysterically now.
‘I can’t pretend I am ok with this’ he said, barely able to speak now through his hysteria.
‘Don’t you care for this famly?’ Phillip asked.
‘I do. You don’t.’
‘I’m not having this’ Philip said turning away then, dismissing Haru. ‘Talk to me when you’ve calmed down.’
He left the room quickly.

Jasmine who had followed them caught him as he was making his way down the corridor.
‘Wait!’ she called out.
Philip glanced back, pausing and turning to her.
‘I’m sorry about that’ he said to her. ‘Haru’s always been this way. It’s not you.’
‘He doesn’t want to marry me’ Jasmine spoke seriously, dipping her head and glancing up at Philip. ‘I don’t.... know if I’m comfortable with this if he feels this way.’
Philip sighed patiently, pursing his lips.
‘We need this’ Philip explained to her, ‘we all do. It will benefit both our families.’
‘This is all about money’ Jasmine spoke levelly.
‘If you have any issues’ Philip said to her, ‘you should talk to your parents. I have to go.’

Chapter Seventeen

The next morning in the boarding school, Sasha and Ben met up.
They stared at each other silently, before looking away again, glancing about themselves.
Aubrey was nowhere to be seen, and he did not appear at lunchtime anywhere, or after class.
‘That little twat has run away’ Sasha snarled. ‘He’s going to intervene in something that’s not his business.’
‘I don’ think you should be using words like that’ Ben said trying to reason with her. ‘Maybe you should just...’
‘He’s gone to find Haru hasn’t he?’ Sasha scowled, looking across the school grounds.
The sky was beginning to darken above them, and the air was getting chilled.

‘I’m concerned for Haru as well’ Sasha said, speaking calmly now. ‘I miss him, I want to see him again but.....’
Ben watched her silently, Sasha gritted her teeth, balling her fists as another wave of anger washed over her.
‘Aubrey’ she spoke with a sneer on her lips. ‘I swear to god the next time I see you I’m going to punch you in the cock so hard your dad will feel it!’
‘Okaaay’ Ben said rolling his eyes and avoiding looking at her now.
They stared opposite directions now, watching silently the world around them.
‘Its so quiet here’ Sasha mumbled speaking to herself, ‘so quiet.’
A distance away, just outside the town, Aubrey rested now.
He had found the address of Haru’s home but did not believe he had found the right place.
The home was a mansion, with large grounds and a great iron fence running all the way around. Now, Aubrey sat outside the fence, hidden from view by the trees that were around him.
He rested on the ground with his elbows on his knees, holding his head in his hands.
Aubrey let out a sigh, turning his head to the side, looking back towards the mansion.
He felt tired, so tired, he didn’t know what to do, he wanted to find Haru, but didn’t know how.
‘This can’t be the place’ Aubrey mumbled to himself. ‘It can’t be.’

Aubrey stayed at this place for the entire night, sleeping where he sat, he was very uncomfortable when he woke early the next morning, feeling cold, feeling hungry.
But it wasn’t that that had woken him, it was something else.
Aubrey heard music.
He stared into the grounds of the manor, mind sluggish still as he gradually became more aware.
Aubrey’s eye widened slightly, beginning to focus on the manor.
The music was distant, was faint. But Aubrey recognised it.
It was the same melody that Aubrey had heard Haru play on the piano back at the school, the one that had captured his heart.
Aubrey let out a gasp.
‘Haru....’
He stepped back then, tilting his up at the iron fence, then looking to his left, then right.
He turned around and looked to the trees around him, eyes traveling along the branches overhead.
Aubrey approached one of the trees, touching the trunk with both hands, looking upwards.
He began to climb.
Aubrey moved with ease, stepping lightly across one of the wider branches. He leapt forwards when the branch began to get a little thin, bending beneath his weight. He made it clear over the top of the fence.
Aubrey landed hard, feeling pain shooting through his legs as he fell.
He groaned in agony, gritting his teeth before rising gingerly.
He could hear the music clearer now, and it was beautiful.

Aubrey took a step forwards, then another. Aubrey jogged forwards across the grounds, heading towards the manor.
It was massive, a great building with many large windows.
Aubrey reached the base of the building, glancing up. It was three stories high.
Aubrey grimaced, gritting his teeth in determination.
He put his foot up on the windowsill, grasping onto the pipe. He began to climb up the side of the building.

Haru stopped playing when he heard a tap on the window. He put his violin down, glancing around and over his shoulder.
He baulked, nearly dropping his violin.
'What....the heck?'
Haru put his violin down hastily, rushing up to the window and opening it.
'Aubrey!'
'Gah' Aubrey told him.
'Oh my...' Haru fumbled, grabbing Aubrey and pulling him inside.
Aubrey fell forwards awkwardly, tumbling across the carpet, arms and legs all over the place.
Haru stood with his hands over his mouth, tense and still very surprised.
He took a step forwards, lowering his hands and reaching out to him.
'Aubrey...'
'Ahhhhh' Aubrey groaned, rising to his feet. 'Ah my knees....it hurts...'
'Are you alright?'
'Yeah' Aubrey just gasped, straightening then, turning back to face Haru.
His expression brightened.
'I'm so glad to see you' Aubrey grinned widely, looking so happy. 'When you vanished.... I um.... I was really worried.'
'I'm sorry' Haru blinked. 'I....was..... taken out of school. My father.... uh....'
'How can he just take you out of school like that?' Aubrey asked him.
'Well....he sort of owns the school.'
'Really?'
'Yeah' Haru said glumly.
'Why did he take you out of school?' Aubrey asked Haru. 'I was so worried.'
'My father wanted me to meet my fiancé.'
Aubrey was stunned into silence for a few moments.
'Your fiancé?'
'Yeah' Haru mumbled, dropping his eyes to the ground now, feeling the cool breeze coming in through the open window. 'Its an arrangement made between my father, and her parents.'
'An arranged marriage?' Aubrey murmured. 'In this day and age?'
'Yeah' Haru said again. 'It's for business purposes. You know.....'
'Is that really a good reason to get married?'
Haru lifted his head then, smiling, though the smile did not reach his heart.
'She's a really nice girl.'

‘Wait...’ Aubrey said turning slowly on the spot, looking about the room around him. ‘Whoa.....what is this place?’
‘It’s my bedroom.’
‘This place is as big as the entire drama hall’ Aubrey gasped in awe.
He turned back to Haru, stunned into silence for the second time.
‘This.... is your home?’
‘Hm.’
Haru shifted uncomfortably.
‘I don’t like talking about money. I’ve been teased and left out a lot in the past because of it.... people used to call me *rich kid*, but not in a nice way.’
‘I’m sorry’ Aubrey fumbled. ‘I didn’t mean it like that....’
‘It’s ok’ Haru told him. ‘I trust you.... its just....’ he trailed off.
‘What is it?’
‘People care so much about money’ Haru went on. ‘They judge me because my father is rich. They think certain things about me, they assume my life is easy.... or they treat me unkindly out of jealously, I think. But that is so unfair. I really don’t care about money, I would rather be poor and happy.’
‘I guess people want what they don’t have’ Aubrey replied.
‘Yes, that’s true’ Haru grinned widely at him.
‘Why are you looking at me like that?’ Aubrey asked him suddenly suspicious.
‘I’m not’ Haru mumbled speaking behind his hand now. ‘You’re just funny.’
Aubrey looked away again, to the room around them. It was beautifully decorated, in a Victorian style, with old fashioned furniture and a large four-poster bed at the back of the room.
Aubrey took a step forwards into the room, moving slowly away from Haru.
There were sofas here and there, shelves full of books, large open spaces, a small chandelier in the centre, a grand piano on the corner on the opposite side of the room to the bed and near the double doors.
‘This place is incredible’ Aubrey breathed. ‘I can’t believe it....’
Haru hunched his shoulders, glancing away.
‘What’s this?’ Aubrey asked, moving further to the other side of the room towards a painting easel, with a large canvas resting upon it, covered by a large white sheet.
‘Oh’ Haru said, following after Aubrey, ‘its one of my pictures’ he told Aubrey, ‘I like to paint.’
‘Can I see it?’
‘Sure’ Haru said, taking the bottom of the sheet and slowly uncovering the canvas.
Aubrey let out a slow gasp.
‘Oh my gosh....’
Haru stood beside the canvas, holding the sheet in his hand.
‘Did you really paint this yourself?’ Aubrey breathed.
‘Yeah.’
‘It’s amazing...’
‘Ah...’ Haru smiled awkwardly, ‘thanks.’

He dropped the sheet on the floor then, moving across Aubrey to the small round table beside him, quickly trying to tidy up the paints.
‘Dam’ Haru mumbled to himself, as he put the paints hastily back into their box. ‘I’ve left these out too long, the paint has gotten dusty.’
‘How long did this take you?’ Aubrey asked quietly.
‘Um...’ Haru fell silent in thought then. ‘I think around twenty-five hours.... I’m not finished yet. I need to do more background detail.....and I’m still working on the characters hu variations for colour movement so he stands out more.’
‘I’m sure I don’t know what you just said’ Aubrey replied.
Haru giggled behind his hand.
He moved to stand beside Aubrey then, turning towards the canvas.
They stared at the painting together, silently watching the picture, which depicted a male fairy, in a dramatic pose flying through the air, with great and beautiful flowers around him.
‘I can’t believe you drew this yourself’ Aubrey mumbled.
‘Yeah’ Haru grinned.
‘And you can play the violin and piano too’ Aubrey said.
‘I can speak a little Japanese as well’ Haru smiled shyly.
‘Really?’
‘Yeah.’
‘What can you say?’ Aubrey asked.
‘Um...’ Haru turned away. ‘Aishite imasu.’
‘What does that mean?’
‘It means *nice to meet you*.’
‘Cool.’
Haru smiled to himself then.
‘I only know a little’ Haru said, ‘I’m still learning.’
‘Well I think it’s incredible.’
Haru bowed his head then, hands behind his back, blushing.
‘Th-thanks’ he mumbled.
‘I had no idea you were so talented’ Aubrey breathed. ‘I can’t do anything like this.’
‘What do you mean?’ Haru said, ‘you are an amazing actor, when I first saw you perform on stage.... uh....’
Aubrey looked back to face him.
‘It was just really.... cool’ Haru finished.
Aubrey smirked at him in amusement.
Haru’s expression dampened slightly.
‘I miss school’ he voiced. ‘Its been too long since we practiced the play. I miss it. I miss being together with everyone.’
‘You’re right’ Aubrey said. ‘We should practice more when we get back.’
‘I want that’ Haru breathed excitedly.
‘Can I hear you play again?’ Aubrey said to Haru. ‘You play the violin so well.’
‘Oh’ Haru fumbled. ‘I.... yes of course.’
Haru’s left hand twitched then, and he moved forwards to pick up the sheet on the floor, covering the canvas again.

Aubrey followed Haru back across the room, watching as Haru picked up his violin again.
'I'm so glad you came' Haru said to Aubrey then. 'I've been so lonely here.'
'When will you be able to come back to school?' Aubrey asked, sitting on one of the seats.
'Soon' Haru told him. 'Really soon.'
Haru stood before the window, lifting the violin and resting it on his shoulder.
He began to play.
The light from the window behind him cast Haru's profile into shadow, and the curtains either side, swayed gently in the breeze as he began to play.
Aubrey's heart beat harder in his chest, and he felt his skin tingle all over his body as he listened.
The music was so beautiful, and sad. He was utterly captivated, and as he watched Haru play, standing with the light behind him, he couldn't help but think.....
He's like an angel.....

Chapter Eighteen

Haru stood before the grave, a great stone slab set upon a plinth, on top of which was a large statue of an angel, kneeling with a jug in her hands and pouring water upon stone flowers around her.
Haru smiled weakly at the grave, eyes gentle as he stared at the plaque, upon which was written his mother's name.
It was a gentle day; the breeze was cool and the air warm.
The fresh flowers at the front of the grave were arranged in a circle, and there were many beautiful colours.
Haru let out a sigh.

'Haru! Come over here.'
Haru turned to his mother, giggling happily and rushing up to her.
She bent down to pick him up, lifting him high into the air before holding him to her, hugging him and holding him close. Haru giggled and squirmed in his mother's arms as she kissed him on the cheek.
'I love you so much my precious baby boy.'
'I love you too mama' Haru gurgled, leaning into her and wrapping his arms around her neck.

'All the memories I ever had of you were good ones' Haru spoke quietly then. 'You were always so kind to. You loved me so much. I loved you so much too.'
Aubrey stepped closer, standing beside Haru now.
'So, this is where she's buried.'
'Yes' Haru spoke quietly. 'My mother. Her name was Gloria.'

Aubrey looked back at the grave silently.
‘She passed away due to illness’ Haru said, ‘that was a few years ago. When I was born...’ he trailed off then, ‘she passed her weak condition onto me. I was often sick like she was.... when she was alive.’
Aubrey turned his eyes onto Haru, watching his silently.
‘My mother was going through a difficult time.... before she died. Many have said that it was stress that...well...she just got weaker and um.... for a long time before… things were not good.’
Haru swallowed, pursing his lips, before continuing.
‘My entire family at the time was going through a difficult time, but she was bearing the brunt of it. It was horrible.... for all of us.’
Haru paused for a moment, eyes flickering down to his feet before looking back up at the grave.
‘Her own mother....my grandmother...died a violent death. She was murdered. It was horrible for all of us. I was very close to her. None of it seemed real. Even now when I think about it...’ Haru shook his head. ‘I don’t like thinking about it.’
Aubrey continued to watch Haru quietly.
‘Shortly after that, my grandfather died. The doctors called in broken heart syndrome. I was devastated. My mother was devastated. And then my mother’s sisters began to fight over the inheritance. My mother said she didn’t want any of it, and that she cared more about her sisters than she did about money...but that was not enough. Its never enough for some people.’
Haru let out a forlorn sigh.
‘My mother always was too soft many people said. She gave her share of the inheritance to her younger sister, who was pregnant at the time. But she suffered a miscarriage. That was the final straw for my mother. The loss of.... another....it was too much for her. She became very sick after that, and....passed away shortly after.’
‘I’m sorry’ Aubrey voiced at last.
Haru did not respond. His eyes were out of focus as he stared listlessly now at the grave.
‘What are you going to do once you graduate?’ he asked suddenly.
‘What? Oh um....’ Aubrey scratching his arm distractedly. ‘I don’t really know. I never had any plans.’
‘Amelia wanted to be a nurse’ Haru spoke up. ‘She said. Do you remember?’
‘Yeah. Yeah I do.’
‘And Sasha wants to be a nursery school teacher.’
‘Yeah’ Aubreay said again. ‘I remember.’
‘I miss school’ Haru voiced, speaking these thoughts again. ‘It’s been too long since we practiced the play. I miss it. I miss being together with everyone.’
‘Yeah’ Aubrey said again. ‘We should practice more when we get back.’
‘I want that’ Haru breathed excitedly. ‘I want that.’ His eyes grew gentle then, as he thought. ‘I don’t know what I want to do once I leave school, all I want is to be with my friends. I hope we still get to see each other.’
‘I hope so too’ Aubrey said.

‘I know things will change when we graduate’ Haru said, ‘but I hope at least that some things will stay the same.’
Haru turned to Aubrey then, stepping into him, embracing him slowly.
‘Haru?’ Aubrey blinked in confusion.
‘Thank you’ Haru breathed, holding Aubrey firmly in his arms, ‘for everything.’
Aubrey stared down at Haru in confusion, as Haru let go of him again, stepping back.
He smiled up at Aubrey with tears in his eyes.
‘Thank you’ was all Haru was able to say, ‘thank you so much.’

A distance away, a figure watched them from elsewhere in the garden.
Jasmine watched as Haru embraced Aubrey, watched as they spoke for a brief time afterwards, before turning and walking away together.
She didn’t take her eyes from them, hidden from view upon the bench she sat, beneath the shade of the tree, the book she had been reading resting upon her lap was closed.

Haru returned to school a few days later, he did not greet his friends, but instead chose his solace.
He had been at school for several days, before Aubrey realised he had returned.
He had seen Haru from a distance and run over to him.
‘Hey’ Aubrey gasped, slowing to a stop. ‘You’re back.’
Haru turned around, seemingly not surprised to see him there.
‘Aubrey’ he said. ‘I’m glad you’re here.’
Classes were still going on, and the grounds of the school were empty, save for Haru.
‘I guess you wanted to skip your lecture again’ Haru spoke in a monotone.
‘How long have you been back?’ Aubrey asked Haru.
Haru turned away from Aubrey, facing the memorial before him once more.
‘She looks beautiful’ he spoke in a distant voice, staring at the smiling picture of Amelia in its frame, ‘I wish she was still with us.’
‘Haru?’
Aubrey stood behind him, staring at the back of his head.
‘I’ve been afraid for so long’ Haru uttered, speaking to the memorial, it had been placed here shortly after her death, a sculpture upon a raised plinth, upon which sat her picture, protected by glass. There were fresh purple tulips growing around the plinth in the flowerbed. ‘She always liked purple tulips so much’ Haru said distractedly.
‘Are you ok Haru?’ Aubrey asked him, concern in his voice.
‘Im scared’ Haru said.
‘Why are you scared?’
‘Its because of you Aubrey.’
‘What?’
‘You know’ Haru went on, ‘my mother used to say something to me. She used to say this.....*it just takes one act of bravery....one push....to gain the courage to overcome*

obstacles. She has helped me a lot in my life, even after she died. It was because of her, because of the words she spoke to me, that I was able to gain the courage to speak to you for the first time, and it was because of that, that I met all my friends, but I want more.'
'What are you talking about?'
'I want more' Haru breathed, eyes widening then, heart beating faster in his chest with nerves.
His left hand twitched then, he did this when he was nervous, and playing the violin calmed him down.
'It's stupid' Haru mumbled glumly, clutching his hands to his chest, palms sweating as his anxiety heightened. 'You don't feel the same way I know. You said…. you didn't like boys…. that you only liked girls, but I would live with regret for the rest of my life if I didn't say this.'
'That's not true' Aubrey spoke firmly.
'Hu?' Haru glanced around.
'I…. I did say that before I know but…. ach I don't know how to say this. I know its kind of clueless of me, but I didn't really realise what you said before. It was only after…. after Amelia…' he swallowed the lump in his throat, turning away briefly to try to control himself, before looking back at Haru. 'It was when I heard you play the piano for the first time… I saw you there in the dark room, the way the light lit you up…. oh god…' he laughed then, hand going to his forehead. 'I'm really not good at this.'
Haru blinked in surprise, turning around fully now to look at him, his eyes were wide, and he was watching Aubrey with waiting expectation.
'The thing I'm trying to say is' Aubrey continued, '…I….at that very moment I saw you in the hall that day, I began to have feelings for you…feelings…' he bowed his head, flushing slightly, 'm-more than a friend.' He laughed then shortly to himself before continuing. 'And then I um…I thought about our time together, and I realised that…I don't know maybe I was wrong but…I got the feeling that you started to like me too. Just I was thinking about things and…I don't know maybe I was over-analysing it. I thought that maybe you liked me back then…I don't know….' Aubrey laughed to himself again, scratching the back of his head, feeling uncomfortable. 'I just...'
'I did' Haru blurted, causing Aubrey to fall instantly silent. 'I…' Haru fumbled quickly, suddenly flustered, 'I fell for you the very moment I saw you on stage, when I first saw you perform. That was…' he bowed his head then, shoulders hunched as he forced himself to continue, 'that was part of why I was so upset. Because I realised I had fallen in love with you and….and I didn't know what to do….!'
Haru buried his face into his hands, sobbing then.
'I couldn't stop thinking about you' he continued, 'every moment we were together I was paranoid and overanalysing everything I said and did around you, and when we were apart I would think about you, what I would say to you if we ever…. oh god…'
'Stop' Aubrey spoke sharply, causing Haru to instantly stop crying.
Haru glanced up tentatively, hands still raised to his face.
Aubrey reached into his pocket, pulling out a small pack of tissues and dabbing at Haru's eyes.
'You're so pathetic' he spoke softly with a kind smile. 'You need to stop crying all the time.'

‘M-sorry’ Haru mumbled, ‘I don’t mean to.’
Aubrey straightened up again.
‘I didn’t feel the same way before’ Aubrey said. ‘I just saw you as a friend, but then I thought…. I mean I said I only like girls, I know I said that but when I heard you play, something moved…and changed inside me. I was upset and angry and confused at first, though I didn’t show it.’ Aubrey lifted his head then, staring at Haru in the eye. ‘I came to think after a time, because I was kinda confused at first, but I thought to myself…...what does it matter if we’re both guys? Love is love’ he breathed, ‘after all…’
Haru choked back a sob then, biting into his fist.
‘Haru’ Aubrey breathed, reaching out to touch his cheek tenderly, causing Haru to flinch.
Their eyes met, and Haru froze, breath caught in his throat as he stared up at Aubrey.
‘Can I kiss you?’
‘What?’
‘Maybe this is too fast for me’ Aubrey said, ‘but losing Amelia made me realise...how precious life is. I don’t want to watch it go by.’
Haru let out a sob again, hunching his shoulders. He drew a slow breath, feeling suddenly shocked and a little dizzy.
‘I…’ Haru fumbled. ‘Y-yes I…um…I want to kiss you...I’ve dreamed of it.... oh sorry I didn’t mean to say that...that was so cringy...’
Aubrey cupped his face with his hands then, causing him to fall silent, and Haru tensed slightly, tilting his head upwards. Aubrey was completely calm, stepping closer to him, closing the gap between them. He bowed his head then, leaning down to Haru.
Their lips pressed together, a soft and gentle touch.
Haru let out a slight moan, a nervous whimper.
Aubrey leant back from him, gazing into Haru’s face.
‘Can you…’ Aubrey spoke softly, ‘open your mouth?’
Haru blinked slowly, breathing a slow breath.
Aubrey leant forwards again, kissing him for the second time, slipping his tongue forwards.
‘Ah’ Haru breathed, raising his hands to grasp Aubrey’s.
Together after that, they went back to Harus’s dormitory.
‘What about Nate?’ Aubrey asked as Haru closed the door once they were both inside.
‘He’s…’ Haru replied tentatively, ‘…not here… He’s left to visit his family. He won’t be back for a few days’ Haru finished. ‘So…its fine’ he finished, smiling back at Aubrey.
Haru leant back against the door.
Inside the room, it was silent and dark.
Aubrey smiled then, turning around to face Haru.
‘I’m glad we can finally be alone at last’ Aubrey spoke seductively to him. ‘I have longed for it’ he breathed, giving Haru a smirk. ‘Even if I didn’t want to admit it to myself.’
Haru tensed slightly as Aubrey approached him, tilting his head up at Aubrey.
Aubrey caressed Haru’s cheek tenderly, smiling down at him, Haru smiled back.
‘I…I’m glad we can be alone’ Haru breathed. ‘I…I don’t like keeping this secret…I wish we didn’t have to hide it.’
‘I know’ Aubrey spoke in a whisper. ‘I wish the same.’

Haru raised his head as Aubrey leant down to kiss him, opening his mouth as Aubrey slipped his tongue into him.
Aubrey leant away then, gazing into Haru's eyes.
'I want to make love to you' Aubrey whispered. 'I want to be as close to you as I can.' He smiled to himself. 'It feels so weird to say that' he uttered then, 'but somehow this feels right. I want to be with you. I want to...make love to you.'
'I…I want that' Haru breathed, holding Aubrey's hands to him as Aubrey held Haru's cheeks, cupping his face tenderly. 'I want to be close to you, but I….'
'What's wrong?' Aubrey asked.
'I just…I've never done this before…. I'm…scared.'
'There's no need to be scared' Aubrey said. 'We won't do anything you don't want to do.'
'I want this' Haru whispered, 'I love you…. I want to do this.'
Aubrey ran his thumb over Haru's lower lip, before kissing Haru again, running his fingers through his hair.
Haru let out a moan, as Aubrey moved his kisses down to his neck, pulling back his shirt to expose the flesh of his shoulder, biting him gently.
Haru bowed his head as Aubrey gripped him firmly by the shoulders, raising his arms to hold Aubrey back.
They moved away from the door, and towards the bed.
Haru leant back against the bed, and Aubrey bored over him, he lay there on the bed, arms by his side, as Aubrey leant over him, kissing him.
Aubrey ran his hand up Haru's body, slipping beneath his shirt, and winding around his waist.
Aubrey leant back, sitting on Haru's waist as he took his own shirt off, before grasping the bottom of Haru's shirt, lifting it over Haru's head.
Aubrey threw the rest of their clothes onto the floor, both naked now, Aubrey threw the thin white bedsheet over them both, covering them.
His hand slipped down Haru's body, caressing him between the legs. Haru lay beneath him, breathing slowly through his mouth as Aubrey worked.
Eventually Aubrey stopped, grasping Haru's thigh and lifting his leg up.
Haru tensed then, and Aubrey stopped.
'Are you alright?'
'Yeah' Haru said, the edges of his lips twitching in a smile, 'I….'
Aubrey bowed his head.
'Do you want to carry on?'
'Yeah' Haru gasped, beginning to tremble beneath him, his skin feeling very sensitive. 'I…...I want you to touch me…. I… it feels good…'
Aubrey raised his head, looking towards the bedside table, reaching out to it. He took the small tin of Vaseline that was there.
'This may feel a bit strange' Aubrey spoke quietly down to Haru. 'Just stay still' he breathed.
He parted Haru's legs further, before slipping his middle finger into him.
Haru hunched his shoulders, tensing slightly as Aubrey moved his finger gently in and out. His breathing was gradual, his brow furrowed as he lay there, above him Aubrey was calm.
'Are you ok?' Aubrey whispered.

‘Yeah’ Haru gasped.
Aubrey dipped his head slightly.
‘I’m putting another finger in.’
‘Ok….’
Aubrey drew his hand back for a moment, before pushing in again, slipping this time two fingers in. Haru threw his head back, gritting his teeth and spreading his legs further apart as Aubrey moved back and forth, his actions becoming gradually faster, until he took his hand away again.
He leant forwards then, whispering into Haru’s ear.
‘Can you get on your hands and knees for me?’
He moved away as Haru sat up, turning around and doing as asked.
The sheet fell off them, and as Haru gripped the pillow with both hands, Aubrey slipped his fingers in one last time.
‘I’m putting it in’ he whispered leaning over Haru, after playing with him for a few minutes, in which time Haru had begun to relax a lot more.
‘Ok’ Haru breathed, as Aubrey moved away again.
‘Don’t be scared’ Aubrey whispered. ‘I’ll be gentle.’
Haru bowed his head, gritting his teeth as Aubrey pushed himself in, grasping him with both hands around the waist.
Haru let out a whimper as Aubrey went all the way, pausing for a moment and waiting for Haru to relax again, before pulling back a little, and pushing forwards again.
Haru raised his head as Aubrey began to thrust into him, his rhythm constant and firm but gentle at the same time. Haru let out a moan then of pleasure, still on his knees he rested on his chest now, hugging the bed, head turned to the side as Aubrey made love to him.
‘Haru’ Aubrey whispered, pausing for a moment and reaching out to him, touching his cheek.
Haru reach out to him then, grasping his hand in his own.
‘I love you’ Aubrey uttered, as Haru held him firmly.
‘I…I love you’ Haru breathed, smiling as tears ran from his eyes. ‘Please’ he begged, ‘…don’t stop.’
Aubrey took his hand back, grasping Haru with one hand on his waist, the other on his shoulder. He thrust into him again, his breath coming in gasps as he began to sweat in the warm room. He eventually pulled Haru up into a straight position, still on his knees, still inside him, as he hugged Haru from behind. Haru craned his head back, reaching his arms behind him to grasp onto Aubrey as he kissed his shoulder tenderly.

Afterwards they lay on the bed together, snuggled tightly close to one another, Aubrey holding Haru from behind.
Haru shifted slightly, lifting his head and opening his eyes. Aubrey behind him was fast asleep.
Haru hunched his shoulders, curling up on the bed beneath the thin sheets, grasping onto Aubrey’s arm as he held Haru.

Haru let out a sigh, feeling happy, still feeling like this could be a dream.
He closed his eyes, giving himself up to sleep.

Chapter Nineteen

Weeks passed, and Haru and Aubrey acted like nothing had changed. When they were with Sasha and Ben, they acted like things where still the same.
But when they were alone together, they would look at each other a different way now.
'I really want to kiss you again' Aubrey spoke in a hushed voice, so that only Haru could hear.
Haru glanced away quickly, cheeks flushing.
They were sitting alone at a picnic bench during lunchtime, around them other people were minding their own business, but Haru and Aubrey had a silent space around them.
'Please don't' Haru uttered.
'We could tell the others' Aubrey whispered to Haru, speaking so quietly, they had been so so careful these last few weeks.
'I want to' Haru mumbled back, speaking to his knees, 'but um.....'
'I know you didn't want to keep this secret' Aubrey said to him.
'I know.' Haru swallowed.
'Then what is it?'
'I....it's my father' Haru said. 'He owns this school, and I'm terrified of him finding out. He would be furious. If the teachers ever saw.... they would go straight to him about it. He still wants me to marry Jasmine. She's a nice girl but...'
'I know' Aubrey mumbled. 'Its wrong what he's trying to make you do. You can't force people to marry.'
'I want to be with you' Haru rasped between his teeth, his shoulders wracked with sobs now, 'I hate keeping this a secret.' He paused for a moment, trying to control himself. 'I didn't want to keep this a secret' he whispered, elbows on the table now, head in his hands as he began to cry, tears streaming down his cheeks. 'I didn't want to do this like Amelia and Sasha had to...I want to love you openly, I want people to know we are together, but I am afraid.'
He continued to cry into his hands, body trembling all over. On the other side of the bench, sitting as far away from him as possible, Aubrey watched.
'Haru please' he uttered, looking down at himself as he searched his pockets for a pack of tissues. 'Please don't to this, I can't comfort you.'
'I know' Haru mumbled, looking up again, 'I'm sorry.'
He took the tissue that Aubrey offered him, dabbing at his eyes.
'I just want to hold you so badly' Haru whispered.
'I know.'
'I love my mother so much' Haru spoke suddenly.

‘What?’
‘It’s because of her that I gained the courage to speak to you in the first place, and because of her that I gained the courage to tell you my true feelings. Even if you rejected me.... I would be glad at least that I tried.... that I told you how I felt. I really didn’t think that you.... you know...’
‘Yeah, I was confused at my feelings for a while’ Aubrey admitted, still speaking quietly, ‘but I thought then....it doesn’t really matter. Love is love.’
Haru raised his head to Aubrey, glancing at him from across the picnic table, smiling through his tears.
‘I fell in love with you the moment I heard you play’ Aubrey said to him. ‘I was confused at first’ Aubrey said, ‘I didn’t know how I felt or understand what I was feeling but…’ he trailed off them, falling silent. ‘The truth is…I began to have feelings for you long before you admitted you loved me.’
Haru grinned widely, fresh tears running down his cheeks.
He bowed his head then, thinking of his mother’s words.
‘It just takes one act of bravery, a single breath, a heartbeat……just say the words……a small push.’
‘Courage of the black nightingale’ Haru said, speaking the name of the play that line was from. ‘I still want to get onstage again.’
‘We will’ Aubrey told him. ‘Soon. When it feels right.’
‘I love to act’ Haru said to Aubrey then. ‘I feel closer to my mother when I act. She loved the stage too.’
‘I would have liked to have met her’ Aubrey mumbled.
‘Yeah’ Haru murmured. ‘She would have liked you I think, of this I am sure.’

It was some days later, that Aubrey visited Haru again in his dormitory.
‘Your roommate leaves a lot, doesn’t he?’ Aubrey commented.
‘He has um.... family issues’ Haru said, as Aubrey closed the door after him. ‘He has special permission to leave.’
‘Must be nice’ Aubrey sighed.
‘Yeah’ Haru smiled awkwardly.
Aubrey turned his attention onto Haru, closing the space between them as he stepped closer, cupping Haru’s face gently as he kissed him.
‘This still feels a little weird for me’ Aubrey admitted, smiling at him. ‘I never thought we could ever be like this together.’
‘I’m glad that we can be’ Haru uttered, hand resting on top of Aubrey’s as Aubrey caressed his cheek. ‘I’ve wanted you so badly for so long.’
Aubrey smirked at him, the edges of his eyes crinkling as his smile grew.
‘I love you Haru...’
Haru smiled back at him, blinking several times as tears prickled his eyes.
‘I love you too Aubrey.’

‘Say that again’ Aubrey said, bowing his head, and resting his forehead again Haru’s gently, his black hair falling over Haru’s grey.
‘Hm?’
‘Say it again’ Aubrey told him softly, ‘say my name, tell me you love me.’
‘Ha’ Haru breathed, ‘I....I love you.....Aubrey.... I love you.’
Aubrey tilted his head slightly, lowering his head to kiss Haru again.
Haru let out a small moan, Aubrey leant back then, brushing Haru’s tears with his thumb.
‘You’re pathetic’ he spoke gently, ‘you know that?’
‘Yeah’ Haru laughed at him. ‘I know.’
Aubrey kissed him again, slipping his tongue deep inside of Haru’s mouth, tasting him, savouring him.
‘I love you Haru’ he spoke between kisses, ‘I love you.’
Haru began to tremble, grasping onto Aubrey’s shoulders tightly as he felt Aubrey’s tongue, his body tense.
Aubrey stepped back from him then, taking Haru by the wrist gently and pulling him towards the bed.
He pushed Haru back onto the bed, crawling over him and kissing him again.
‘C-can you undress me?’ Haru uttered, flushing slightly, suddenly embarrassed.
‘It would be my pleasure’ Aubrey spoke seductively, kissing Haru’s palm tenderly, and moving up his arm.
Haru let out a moan, turning his head to the side as Aubrey kissed his neck, moving his hand to slowly unbutton his shirt, doing so slowly, one button at a time.
Aubrey moved downwards, kissing Haru’s chest, biting him gently, running his tongue across his belly.
‘Haru...’
‘Y-yeah....’ Haru gasped, cheeks flushed.
Haru flinched as Aubrey caressed him between the legs, Haru was already getting hard.
‘I want to finish you this time’ Aubrey whispered, speaking ever so quietly.
‘Mmmm I love your voice’ Haru sighed.
Aubrey chuckled lightly, sitting up a little straighter then.
‘Haru....’
‘Yeah?’
‘Can I... suck it?’
‘Hmm?’
‘Can I... suck your cock?’
Aubrey suddenly laughed at himself then, hand going to his head.
‘It sounds so dirty when I say it like that’ Aubrey said.
‘I don’t mind’ Haru said, speaking weakly. ‘I mean... if you want to...’
‘I do’ Aubrey uttered, reaching out and caressing Haru’s cheek tenderly. ‘I think I know what would feel good for you, I’ve never done it before with a guy but... I’d like to try.’
Haru flushed bright red then, using the sheets to cover his mouth as he hunched his shoulders.
‘Don’t hide your face like that’ Aubrey whispered, reaching out to him and pulling the blankets away gently. ‘I want to see your face.’
Haru looked up at Aubrey shyly, head still bowed.

‘That’s better’ Aubrey smiled, reaching down and caressing him between the legs. Haru flinched as Aubrey touched him again.
‘I want to do it’ Aubrey spoke seductively, ‘I want to do it’ he said, kissing Haru briefly.
‘Aubrey....’ Haru moaned weakly as Aubrey kissed him again. ‘Do it’ he whispered, cheeks flushed, ‘I want you to.’
Aubrey leant back then, unzipping Haru’s trousers.
‘Just try to relax’ he whispered to Haru.
‘Ok....’
‘Lie back down.’
‘Ok....’
Aubrey pulled Haru’s trousers down a little further, lowering his head.
He put his mouth around Haru, Haru instantly let out a moan.
‘You have to be quiet’ Aubrey spoke softly to him.
Haru clapped his hands over his mouth, letting out a whimper as he tried to control his emotion.
‘Are you alright?’
‘Y-yes’ Haru gasped. ‘I just...’ a tear ran from the corner of his eye then, ‘I’m just so happy....’
Aubrey smiled at him, bowing his head again, and putting his mouth around Haru once more.
Haru arched his back, spreading his legs wider.
‘Does that feel good?’ Aubrey whispered, his arm curled tightly around one of his legs.
‘Yeah...’ Haru gasped. ‘Don’t stop....’
Aubrey continued to moved his head back and forth gently, grasping onto Haru’s leg firmly.
‘A-Aubrey’ Haru gasped.
‘Are you going to come?’
‘Yeah.’
‘It’s ok’ Aubrey said, reaching up to Haru and stroking his cheek. ‘You can come.’
‘Ok...’
Aubrey put his mouth around him again and continued to work.
Haru threw his head back, gritting his teeth and grasping the bedsheets as he came.
He let out a low moan, relaxing quickly as Aubrey leaned away from him again, straightening up and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.
Haru heard him gulp.
‘How....did that feel?’ Aubrey asked him.
‘That felt really good.’
Aubrey continued to stare at him, before reaching towards him again.
‘Can I.....’ Aubrey began.
‘I want you to make love to me’ Haru told him sincerely. ‘I want.....to feel you inside of me.
Aubrey paused for only a moment, before his hands went to his own trousers, slowly pulling them down.
‘I want you to take everything off’ Haru mumbled to him. ‘I.... want to see your body naked.’
Aubrey smiled at that, taking off his shirt also.
Haru’s eyes travelled slowly down his body, and further still as Aubrey took his trousers off.

Haru rested back against the bed as Aubrey leant over him, his hand running down Haru's body, snaking around his thigh, and behind.
Haru gasped as Aubrey slipped his finger in, playing with him for a time, before pushing himself in.
Haru spread his legs wider, grasping onto Aubrey as he thrust inside him, firmly but gently.
Aubrey lowered his body on top of Haru's, continuing to move inside of him, Haru's arms wrapped around Aubrey's upper body, clinging onto him as he felt Aubrey pushing deep into him.
Aubrey began to sweat, Haru running his hand down Aubrey's chest, feeling him, grasping him, his other hand curling around the back of his neck and weaving through his hair.
'Don't stop' Haru breathed. 'Don't stop.'
Aubrey kissed him again, pausing his thrusts only for a short time, before breaking away, and continuing to push inside of him.
'Come' Haru moaned, 'come...'
Aubrey's grip tightened on Haru's shoulder, and he thrust inside him one last time.
His grasp on Haru's shoulder relaxed then, and he lowered his body on top of Haru's, breathing heavily, his sweat mixed with Haru's as their bodies were pressed together.
Haru's cheeks were flushed as he raised his arms again, embracing Aubrey, gently this time.
'I love you' he uttered, 'I love you....'
Aubrey turned his head to face Haru's.
They stared at each other, a deep longing in both their eyes.
Aubrey leant towards him, kissing him again.
'I hope we can always be together' Haru whispered, tears brimming in his eyes, awash with emotion. 'I don't want to leave you.... I don't want to be away from you, these last few weeks we've been together.... have been the happiest for me.'
'Why are you talking like that?' Aubrey asked tenderly, caressing his face lovingly. 'I'm not going anywhere.'
'I know' Haru mumbled, shoulders hunched. 'I just don't want to lose you.'
'You're not going to lose me' Aubrey frowned at him, 'I... I love you' he said to Haru, 'I am looking forward to um...'
'What is it?' Haru blinked up at him, Aubrey still inside of him.
'I want the same thing you want' Aubrey spoke in a whisper to Haru. 'I want us to be together, and to not keep it a secret.'
'I want that' Haru gulped, 'but....'
He broke off quickly as the door to the dormitory suddenly opened, and Nate stepped in.
Haru stared wide-eyed over Aubrey's shoulder as Aubrey glanced around towards the door, seeing Nate there, standing frozen in the doorway with his hand still on the handle, the light from the hall wall behind him lighting up the room.
Aubrey hesitated for only a moment, glancing downwards.
He pulled out of Haru quickly, causing Haru to flinch.
He got off the bed and in two strides, moved across the small room, slamming the door behind Nate and rounding on him
'Who are you?' Aubrey demanded.

‘I could ask the same of you’ Nate asked, cheeks red as he fumbled his words. ‘Why are you here?’ He tilted his head to the ceiling then, not wanting to look at him. ‘Please get dressed.’
He tilted his head to the side then, seeing Haru in bed, hiding his face in the sheets.
Nate’s brow furrowed, as he stared at Haru in disbelief.
‘I can’t believe this’ he murmured, as Aubrey moved away, grabbing his clothes and dressing quickly. ‘What the hell is going on here?’
‘Please don’t tell anyone’ Haru begged him, finally lowering the sheets from his face. ‘Please.’
‘Wait a minute...’ Nate said, looking at Aubrey more closely now that he was dressed. ‘I know you.....I’ve seen you before.’
‘Yeah’ Aubrey spoke flatly. ‘I’m one of Haru’s friends.’
‘I don’t think so’ Nate retorted, and Aubrey rounded on him with a glare, but said nothing.
Haru glanced from each of them nervously.
‘How long has this been going on?’ Nate asked.
‘Doesn’t matter’ Aubrey replied.
Nate turned his eyes on Haru.
‘Please don’t tell anyone’ Haru said to him.
‘Why are you keeping this a secret?’ Nate asked.
‘My father wouldn’t like it’ Haru shook his head, beginning to cry now out of fear and panic. ‘Please. He wants me to marry a girl.... but I don’t love her. I don’t want to. I love Aubrey, I want to be with him.’
‘Then why keep it a secret?’
‘You don’t understand’ Haru sobbed, burying his face in the sheets again. ‘He would be furious.’
‘Why?’
Haru raised his head again, tears streaming down his cheeks, but he was unable to speak now.
‘Its alright’ Aubrey said, turning to comfort him. ‘Don’t be upset.’
He kissed Haru on the forehead gently, holding him tenderly.
‘I love you Haru’ Aubrey said, moving away from him and towards the window. ‘Please don’t worry. It will be alright.’ He spoke to Nate now. ‘You will keep this a secret.’
Nate’s expression slowly changed then into a scowl. It was clear he was irritated by Aubrey.
‘I’ll see you again tomorrow’ Aubrey said, speaking to Haru as he opened the window. ‘I love you.’
Haru opened his mouth to reply, but Aubrey was already slipping through the window and out of sight.
Haru reached out to him, but he was already gone.
‘Please be careful’ Haru uttered to the air, before turning back to face Nate who stood there with his arms folded, looking displeased.

Chapter Twenty

‘What the hell man?’ Nate scowled.
‘What?’ Haru fumbled.
‘You can’t be fucking in here, this is my room too you know.’
‘No it isn’t like that!’
‘Are you serious?’
‘Ok…it *is* like that’ Haru mumbled into his blankets again.
‘How long has this been going on?’ Nate asked him, moving over to his own bed.
‘I don’t....’ Haru uttered.
‘Just tell me.’
‘Um...’ Haru swallowed reluctantly, ‘a few weeks.’
‘Uh-hu?’
Nate sat on his own bed, staring at Haru hard.
‘Why is this supposed to be a secret?’
‘Please. You can’t tell anyone about this.’
‘Why? No one’s going to care.’
‘You don’t?’
‘Me?’ Nate said, sounding confused. ‘Dude, why would I care if you’re gay? I’ll admit I’m a little surprised, I had no idea.... but why would you hide it? Why is it a secret?’
‘I’m scared of my father finding out.’
‘Right?’
‘He still wants me to marry Jasmine....but I don’t want to.... I don’t want to....’
Nate watched Haru silently as he cried into his sheets, hugging his knees to him.
‘You’re living a lie. You shouldn’t be afraid of your father. Your life is your own.’
‘Hm?’ Haru glanced up Nate tentatively then.
‘Why do you care what your father thinks? Nate went on.
Haru stared at him.
‘Are you afraid of him?’ Nate asked.
‘I guess I am’ Haru mumbled.
‘Why? I’m not afraid of my parents.’
‘My father is different’ Haru spoke unhappily. ‘He’s so controlling but.... he doesn’t love me.... not as a father should.... not as my mother did.’
‘You should tell him the truth.’
‘How could I do that?’
‘You have to be strong’ Nate told him, ‘I know it’s not easy. What are you afraid of?’
Haru let out an unhappy sigh, eyes distant as he stared into nothing.
‘I just want to be with Aubrey’ Haru mumbled under his breath. ‘I wish we didn’t have to keep what we have a secret’ Haru said. ‘I love Aubrey.... and I want to be with him openly.’

The next day, Aubrey and Haru met up in secret.
They met at the edge of the school grounds, hidden from view by the small collection of trees.

Haru leaned into Aubrey, tilting his head back as he kissed him, clutching at the front of his shirt as Aubrey held him in a firm embrace.
A short distance away, a figure watched them, completely unseen to them.
Nate lifted his camera, snapping some shots, before backing off carfully, turning and walking away.

The next day

'What does he want?' Aubrey asked Haru, his voice sounding a little uncertain.
'I don't know' Haru mumbled. 'He might want me to meet up with Jasmine again, to continue with arrangements..... I don't know.'
Aubrey turned his head away silently.
'I sorry about this' Haru sobbed. 'I never wanted any of that.... I just want to be with you...'
'Hey' Aubrey spoke softly, grasping his shoulder and smiling. 'Don't worry. Its going to be ok.'
'Do...do you think that… do you really think that?'
'I do' Aubrey whispered to him, cupping his face.
He was about to lean down and kiss him, when there came a knock on the door of Haru's dormitory.
It was just Aubrey and Haru in the room now, alone together, but Sasha and Ben had been informed that Haru was leaving school again.
'That's probably them' Aubrey said, letting go of Haru and moving away from him.
'I'll get it' Haru said, rising from the bed and moving over to the door as Aubrey moved over towards the window.
Haru glanced back at Aubrey before he opened the door, and Aubrey winked at him, putting his finger to his lips.
Haru smiled before looking around and grasping the handle, opening the door.
'Oh, Aubrey you're already here' Sasha said, striding into the room, Ben following after her and smiling at Haru as he walked in.
Sasha entered the room without pausing, turning on the spot and looking about the dormitory only briefly before turning her eyes onto Haru.
'So why are you leaving?' she asked Haru. 'We're going to miss you.'
'I'm going to miss you too' Haru smiled sweetly back, 'I'm going to miss all of you. Don't worry about me, I'll be back soon. I don't know when though, my father wants me home. I don't know what he wants though.'
'Are you still engaged?' Ben asked him, standing there with his hands in his pockets.
'Yeah' Haru mumbled unhappily.
'You gotta get out of it man' Sasha told him, leaning on her hip and folding her arms. 'That's not right. To make someone marry a person they don't love.... you should *fight it*!'
Haru glanced tentatively towards Aubrey, but he was looking out the window instead, seemingly distracted, though Haru got the feeling he was listening closely.
'I will try' Haru said to Sasha, laughing awkwardly.

‘Hey’ Sasha gleamed, ‘if you like, you can tell your father that you love me instead, that might help you get out of his arranged marriage. I mean...’ she added in a sullen voice, ‘you all know now I’m a lesbian.... thanks to Aubrey’ she finished sourly glaring at him.
Aubrey said nothing, but glanced towards her with a mischievous glint in his eyes.
‘You can trust that I’ll never try to put the moves on you’ Sasha teased, speaking to Haru again. ‘Maybe we can pretend to be a couple?’
‘Yeah’ Haru laughed uncertainly, hunching his shoulders shyly and blushing slightly. ‘Maybe.’
Sasha knew Haru had feelings for Aubrey, what she did not know, is that Aubrey felt the same way towards Haru, and that they had admitted their feelings to one another, and become physical.
Sasha at least knew part of it, Ben on the other hand was completely oblivious.
‘When are you leaving?’ Ben asked.
‘In a few minutes’ Haru replied forlorn. ‘I am looking forward to coming back though. I don’t like it at home. Not like I used to.’
‘Oh well’ Sasha let out a heavy sigh. ‘I wonder what that old fool wants...?’

Later that day, Haru sat in his father’s office, sitting in a chair before the desk, waiting.
I can’t believe this Haru thought sullenly to himself. *I hate being summoned to his office like a servant. Who does that to his own son?*
Haru frowned to himself, balling his fists and hunching his shoulders.
Where is he?
Philip arrived several minutes later, closing the door behind him with a snap and moving around the desk. He sat in the large chair, leaning back and staring at Haru silently, jaw clenched.
A flutter of nerves rose in him then, and his stomach tightened slightly.
‘What is it?’ Haru asked tentatively. ‘Why did you want to see me?’
His father continued to stare at him for the longest time before fianally speaking.
‘Do you have something you want to tell me?’
‘What?’
Philip stared at him.
‘I....no’ Haru fumbled. ‘I don’t.... why?’
Philip continued to stare at him, before letting out a sigh, leaning forwards and opening one of the desk drawers.
He took out something and dropped it on the desk in front of Haru.
Haru leaned forwards to get a closer look, eyes widening in horror as he glanced back up at his father.
‘What do you have say about this?’ his father demanded.
Haru shook his head in panic, rising from his chair and backing away.
‘Is this you?’ his father snapped, taking the picture on the top and showing it to him. ‘Is this you!’

Haru clapped his hands to his mouth, beginning to cry, shoulders wracked with sobs.
'What the hell is wrong with you?!' his father shouted, grabbing the rest of the photos and throwing them at him. 'How could you do this!?'
Haru let out a whimper, hands still to his face as he watched the photos fall around him.
He glanced down at one of the photos that had landed on the floor before his feet. The photo showed Haru and Aubrey in each other's arms, kissing each other.
Haru flinched as his father grabbed him by the wrist, having moved around the desk to reach him.
'How could you be this way!? How could you do this? You're supposed to marry Jasmine.'
Haru began to gasp then, starting to hyperventilate.
'Calm down' his father spoke harshly to him, pressing his hand over his mouth, and stopping his breathing.
Haru stared up wide-eyed at his father, who had pushed him against the wall now. Haru breathed through his nose as tears of fear and panic streamed down his cheeks, held in place by his father.
'Control yourself' his father glared down at him. 'Don't start this nonsense again. I'm tired of it.'
His father only drew back when Haru appeared to be in control of himself again, stepping away from him.
Haru immediately collapsed, falling to his knees, clutching at his heart that beat painfully in his chest, body hunched over.
He reached out to the photo on the floor before him with shaking hands, picking it up and staring at it.
He stared at the photo, trying to make sense of it. Who had seen them that day he wondered, and as he stared, he realised that this photo was taken recently, just the other day, yesterday, when Aubrey and Haru met together in the collection of trees at the edge of the school grounds.
Haru stared at it, eyes wide, tears falling onto the photo as his mind began to whirl.
Nate?
'I can't believe this' Philip shook his head, sounding so disappointed and hurt as he moved across the small office and back behind his desk, '...my own son.'
Haru's head snapped up then, and he was suddenly overcome by a wave of anger.
'Don't say it like you actually care about me' Haru snapped angrily at him, balling his fists and trembling with rage. 'You never treated me like a son!'
'You're over emotional' Philip answered calmly.
'And you're not emotional enough!' Haru barked, rising to his feet, and balling the photo up in his hand in anger. 'You just.... never cared about me.... you never cared. You've been cold to me my entire life! You're just so cold..... why can't you just understand?! Why are you the way you are? Why do you have to be this way? I don't care about money...' Haru sobbed, as the anger left him, replaced by only sadness. 'I love Aubrey. I love him. I don't want to marry Jasmine. I want to be with Aubrey. I love him. I love him.....'
His father watched him without reaction, eyes half-open, face expressionless as Haru sobbed hysterically into his hands.

‘You don’t know me!’ Haru bawled now, throwing his head back as fresh tears streamed down his cheeks. ‘You have no idea who I am! You’ve never known.... you’ve never cared.....you....’
He broke off, wobbling on the spot, his father’s eyes widened slightly, and he tensed.
He rushed forwards then, catching Haru as he fell, holding him in his arms.
‘Haru.’
He touched Haru’s forehead then.
‘You’re burning up’ Philip mumbled.
He called out for help then, and moments later, one of the housekeepers burst into the room.
‘Call an ambulance’ Philip urged her, still holding Haru in his arms, kneeling on the floor beside him, Haru now completely unresponsive, head hung and body limp.
The housekeeper hesitated for only a moment, caught in a moment of shock before coming to herself again, and running to get the phone.

Haru was visited by the paramedics, but he was not taken to hospital, instead returned to the school.
He did not stay home. His father sent him back to the school, thinking perhaps he would recover faster, being away from home. He did not want Haru to go to hospital either, believing that he was not that sick. But the stress Haru had suffered, caused him to fall gravely ill, as his fever got worse.
Haru’s friends in school continued as normal, having no idea that Haru was back, having no idea that he was sick, until Aubrey found him by chance.

It had been many days Haru had been absent, and on a hunch, Aubrey decided to go look for him, checking first his dormitory, finding that empty, then checking the hospital wing.
What he saw broke his heart.
He saw only a glimpse of Haru lying in the bed through the small window in the door, fast asleep. Even from where he stood a distance away, Aubrey could see how red his cheeks where. His fever was so high.

Chapter Twenty-One

Aubrey had tried to get into the room but was surprised to find the door had been locked, and so he could do nothing.

He came back the next day to try to see him, accompanied by Sasha and Ben this time. But the nurse would not let them into the hospital wing at all, and they were all stopped at the entrance.
'Where is Haru?' Aubrey demanded. 'I want to see Haru.'
'I'm sorry' the nurse replied firmly, 'but he's very sick. He's not taking any visitors right now.'
'That's rubbish' Aubrey scoffed.
'I'm sorry' the nurse spoke in a firmer voice. 'He is *not* taking any visitors.'
'This is fucking ridiculous' Aubrey hissed at that.
'Aubrey' Sasha spoke nervously, 'you shouldn't use language like that…'
Aubrey turned to glare back at Sasha, tears of frustration in his eyes.
'He's our friend' Aubrey spoke defiantly. 'We can't just ignore him…'
'There's nothing we can do' Ben spoke softly from his other side.
'I want to see him' Aubrey snapped at her, '…I…. I want to see him…'
He fell silent, staring down at the floor then. The others watched him, surprised by his reaction.
'We should maybe come back later' Ben suggested. 'We don't want to cause a scene.'
'Come on' Sasha prompted, taking Aubrey by the arm gently. 'We should go…'
'Why won't you let us see him?' Aubrey demanded again.
'Aubrey please' Sasha spoke patiently, as before them the nurse stood there impassive.
'Why is he sick all of a sudden?' Aubrey said becoming more hysterical, 'what happened to cause him to be ill?'
'Aubrey!'
'Why are you getting so upset?' Ben asked him, becoming a little scared himself. Aubrey please stop.'
Aubrey jerked his arm out of Sasha's grasp, turning and stalking away. The others followed after him.
Sasha and Ben took him to a quiet place after that to speak to him.
Sitting in an empty classroom now, they spoke.
'What is wrong with you?' Ben asked him. 'Why are you so upset over this? Haru's been sick before, you know he'll be fine.'
'Its his father' Aubrey hissed under his breath. 'His fathers done something to cause him this stress to fall so ill.'
Sasha watched Aubrey with wide eyes, glancing briefly to Ben before looking back at Aubrey.
'You see…. the truth is……' Aubrey began reluctantly, '...I love Haru...'
The others watched him in a silence that stretched on.
'We all care about Haru' Ben told him, 'and we miss him too.'
'No' Aubrey shook his head. 'You don't understand' Aubrey told him, 'I love him…*we* love each other…we are in love….'
The silence stretched, and for a time, Aubrey said nothing.
'We've…...had sex…...' Aubrey said, his heart constricted in his chest. 'We've…...had sex…….'
Aubrey buried his face in his hands, beginning to shudder and sobbing quietly.

‘I love Haru…’ Aubrey whimpered, ‘I would die for him…...’
They stared at Aubrey in shock now, not believing what they were hearing.
‘You and Haru….’ Sasha began, ‘are a couple….?’
‘Just like you and Amelia were’ Aubrey replied to her. ‘And just like you we kept it a secret.... Haru....is afraid of his father. I wonder.... did his father find out? Is this why he’s ill? You know he gets sick easily....and the stress....’
Aubrey slowly straightened up, taking his hands away from his face.
‘Yeah…’ Aubrey mumbled, ‘we are a couple…...’ he swallowed the lump in his throat. ‘We’ve kept it a secret for so long…oh gods…’ he clenched his teeth, eyes brimming with tears. ‘If anything happened to him….’ He bit his hand then, so hard it began to bleed.
‘Stop’ Sasha hastened, grabbing his hand and pulling it away. ‘You’re bleeding.’
Aubrey did not react, but instead continued to stare into nothing.
‘Oh Aubrey…’ Sasha whimpered.
She embraced him then, holding him tightly.
Aubrey stared over her shoulder, eyes wide in shock.
‘I want to see him’ Aubrey said, ‘no matter what. I want to see him.’
‘What are you suggesting?’ Sasha asked him.
‘I want see him....’ Aubrey breathed. ‘His father has taken him away. I want to see him…. I *have* to…I have no idea what his father has done to make him this ill.... perhaps he knows about us....’
‘Aubrey’ Sasha spoke calmly. ‘We cannot do anything to help him. He is with the nurses now, they will care for him. There is nothing we can do for him.’
‘But what if he dies….?’ Aubrey breathed, forcing himself to speak the words, though it pained him to do so. ‘You know how weak he is...’
‘Don’t say things like that’ Sasha replied, speaking angrily now. ‘He’s going to be fine. You’re just over-reacting. You’re being silly...’
There was a silence after that.
‘Sasha’ Aubrey voiced. ‘Haru’s mother had the same illness as him’ he told them. ‘And…. she died….’
Sasha straightened up, but she forced her expression to remain impassive.
‘I don’t want to say anything negative’ Aubrey continued, ‘but we have to be realistic. Let’s not fool ourselves. Haru is really sick. How do we know it’s not serious?’
Sasha didn’t reply, but continued staring at the wall.
‘I’m sure he’s going to be fine’ Ben said, speaking for the first time in a while, ‘he’s been like his before and been fine in the end.’
‘I’ve never seen him like that before’ Aubrey mumbled, remembering the other day when he saw him through the small window in the door. ‘He looked so ill.... oh.... Haru....’
‘You’re overthinking this’ Ben told him calmly. ‘You have different feelings for him now, you’re protective. He’ll be fine.’
Aubrey stared past Sasha, eyes brimming with tears.
‘Maybe you’re right’ Aubrey spoke quietly to himself now. ‘Maybe I *am* overthinking this.’
Aubrey blinked several times to try to keep his tears back.
‘Haru said that his mother’s sickness was caused by stress’ Aubrey continued. ‘They were going through a difficult time, and it ultimately….’ He never finished his sentence, but he

spoke again. ‘We don’t know how serious it is’ Aubrey continued, ‘we have to be prepared, that’s all I’m saying.’
There was a pause.
‘We have to go see him’ Aubrey whimpered.
‘There is nothing we can do’ Sasha reasoned.
‘But what if we never see him again!?’ Aubrey cried.
‘You’re being ridiculous’ Sasha snapped angrily at him then. ‘He’s going to be fine.’
‘You didn’t see him’ Aubrey snarled back.
The room rang silent.
‘Forget it’ Aubrey mumbled after a time. ‘Just forget I spoke.’
‘Aubrey….’ Sasha uttered.
‘No, its fine’ he forced a smile, looking up at her. ‘Just….’ He let out a sigh. ‘I um…. I’m just tired’ he said. ‘I think I’m going to rest. If you don’t mind, I want to be alone for a bit.... I’m going to just sit here.... why don’t you guys go on...?’
Ben and Sasha made their way out of the room, Sasha paused on the threshold of the door.
‘Are you sure you’re going to be ok?’ Sasha asked.
‘Yeah yeah’ Aubrey replied hastily. ‘I’m fine, really, I just…. I’m tired…. that’s all…’
Sasha let out a sigh, frowning at him.
‘Alright’ she relented. ‘if you’re sure. We’ll see you later then...maybe tomorrow?
‘Sure’ Aubrey nodded. ‘See you tomorrow. Enjoy your classes.’
Sasha gave him the smallest frown, before turning and walking away, following after Ben.
Once the door closed, Aubrey was left in silence.
Aubrey thought to himself, head bowed as he stared down at his lap.
I have to do something.... I have to do something..... I have to see him.
He raised his head, gritting his teeth with determination.
I will see him. No matter what.

That night, once it had gotten dark, Aubrey snuck out of his dormitory once again, not even creeping down the corridors, but climbing straight out the window as he so often did.
The matron often patrolled the corridors, but she had not cottoned on yet to Aubrey’s ploys, and Aubrey was free to roam as he pleased. He had not yet been caught doing this.
Aubrey’s roommate watched him lazily from the bed as he clambered through the window.
Aubrey was very familiar by this time of all the cracks and crevasses in the wall and the best way to climb down, and so he moved with surety.
Aubrey landed lightly on the grassy earth below, allowing himself to fall the last part and landing catlike.
He straightened up, brushing the leaves from his shoulders. The ivy that grew on this side of the building was thick, and Aubrey took advantage of this.
He paused for only a short time, tilting his head back to the sky to see the moon large and beautiful.
‘Perfect’ Aubrey uttered, smiling towards the stars. ‘I could use the light.’
He set off across the grounds, making his way towards the building the hospital wing was located. His eyes were lifted to the building as he jogged forwards. Haru’s room was on the

second floor, and Aubrey would have to be careful as he climbed. But he felt confident as he slowed to a stop at the bottom of the building.
Aubrey stood there for a time, scanning the side of the building, wondering which the best way was to climb.
'I gotta get up there' Aubrey spoke quietly to himself. 'I gotta get up there. I gotta see Haru...see if he's alright...'
Aubrey moved closer towards the building, grasping onto the stone and lifting his leg up.
He began to climb, doing ever so carefully.
Though the moon was out, lighting his way, he still had to be careful. He had never come this way before, but he was determined. As he climbed, he had only Haru on his mind.
But as he reached the window to the room he had last seen Haru in, he saw that the bed was empty.
Aubrey clung to the windowsill outside the room, staring through the glass with wide eyes.
'Shit where is he?' he rasped.
He continued to scan the room for a few more moments, but it was no good. Haru was not there.
Aubrey began to grow increasingly worried. The room was dark, no lights were turned on, but Aubrey could see dim lights from the corridor through the little window in the door.
He suddenly felt his foot slip then, and Aubrey grasped desperately at the windowsill as he balanced precariously, holding onto the ledge with everything now as he struggled to find his feet.
His heart beat fast with nerves in his chest.
Aubrey stared at the ground with wide eyes as he clung on tightly, facing ahead again and moving tentatively. He moved along the ledge, holding the stone tightly.
Aubrey began to climb down, but before he could reach a safe level, his foot slipped for the second time, but this time, he was not holding onto something firm.
He fell, landing hard on his knees, crying out in agony as pain shot through his legs.
He grimaced, body tense and gritting his teeth as tears prickled in his eyes.
Aubrey turned to look back up at the window, face contorted in grief and pain.
He gingerly rose to his feet, wobbling as he felt the dull ache in his knees.
He teetered, before leaning forwards, and moving away from the building, silently through the night.

At lunchtime the next day, Sasha and Ben went to see Haru, only to learn he had been taken back home, as his condition had worsened. But that was not all, they learned that Aubrey had run away.
'What do you mean he's gone?!' Sasha cried in horror as beside her Ben looked stunned.
'We've contacted his parents' the nurse spoke patiently. 'We've also notified the police. They are keeping a look out for him around the town.'
'He's not going to be staying around the town' Sasha hissed. 'I should have known this would happen.'
Ben instantly grabbed her then, squeezing her shoulder tightly and urging her silently to keep quiet.

She looked away from him and back towards the nurse.
‘Forget it’ she spoke hastily. ‘It’s all fine. Gotta go, bye!’
She turned and ran, with Ben jogging after her.
‘Where are you going?’ he asked her when they had rounded the corner and were out of earshot of the nurse or anyone else who might be nearby.
‘I’m going to find him’ Sasha hissed angrily.
‘What?’ Ben gasped.
‘If Aubrey can find a way out of this prison then so can we’ she said angrily.
‘But the fences are too high’ he tried to reason.
‘I he can escape then I can too!’ she snapped.
‘Sasha wait!’
But she didn’t slow, instead she ran faster now, driven by determination she bolted down the corridors, down the stairs and out of the building.
‘I’m going to find that jerk’ she breathed, pausing only briefly before setting off again. ‘How dare he leave without me!’

‘Wait!’ Ben called after her as she stormed out of the building. ‘Where are you going?’
‘I’m going to find both of them’ Sasha answered back.
‘But why?’
Sasha stopped suddenly, staring ahead.
‘I’m frightened’ she spoke clearly then. ‘What if Aubrey is right and Haru really is that sick...? Maybe he knows something we don’t about Haru....
‘Sasha...’
‘I can’t explain it’ she voiced then, ‘I just... I have this feeling inside that I cannot explain, I’m just so sick with worry for both of them. And I want to go and see them.’
‘You’re leaving?’ Ben said surprised.
‘I want to see Haru’ Sasha said. ‘I want to see that he’s ok.’
Sasha turned on the spot, facing Ben at last.
‘I’m getting out of here’ Sasha breathed, ‘I’m getting out of here.’
‘Ah’ Ben breathed then, hand going to his chest as he began to gasp.
‘Are you alright?’
‘It’s my asthma’ Ben gasped. ‘I have to go and get my pump.... I’m getting stressed...’
‘Go back to your room’ Sasha told him, turning away again, ‘I’ll find Haru. Look after yourself Ben’ she said to him, before running away, heading towards the entrance gates of the school.
She knew where Haru lived, Haru had told her before. She knew she could get there by foot, it was a long way, but Sasha was determined.
She began to make her way, heading out of the school and towards the large manor that was Haru’s home.
In another place, closer to the manor, Aubrey walked. He had walked for hours without rest, still in agony from the fall. His pace was slow, but he pushed himself onwards, despite the shooting pain in his knees. All he could think about was Haru, and how desperately he wanted to see him again, and how he feared for him.

He was determined to reach Haru, no matter what.

Aubrey saw the manor at last. He had walked for the entire night without rest, and most of the next day.
He was exhausted and hungry and in pain. But he did not stop to rest, not once.
He had only thoughts of one thing, and that's what drove him.
He reached the gates, they were locked. But this did not faze him.
Aubrey climbed the wall, moaning in agony at the pain shooting though his legs, but grimacing he carried on, making his way over the top, and onto the grounds.
He landed on his feet, pausing for a moment, waiting for the pain to subside.
After a time, he straightened up, stumbling towards the manor.
He reached the front door, banging on it with both fists.
'Open the door!' He cried, beating the wood as hard as he could. 'Let me in!'
He paused, throwing his head back and staring up at the windows above, taking several steps away from the door to see if he could see through the windows, to see if anyone was there.
The door opened then, and Aubrey's attention snapped back, and he saw Haru's father standing there in the doorway before him.
'What are you doing here?' Philip demanded, clearly displeased to see him there. 'You are not welcome here.'
'You know me then?' Aubrey asked.
'Yes' Philip spoke in a sincere voice. 'I do.'
'Then who I am?'
Philip pursed his lips, staring down at Aubrey with distant.
'You and my son....' but he was unable to finish the sentence, clearly disgusted by it.
'So you do know' Aubrey narrowed his eyes. 'I want to see Haru' Aubrey demanded.
'Did you walk here?' Philip asked in surprise then. 'You look awful. I heard from the school you had run away. I thought you might come here, and from those pictures I was given.... I knew what you looked like.'
'I want to see Haru' Aubrey repeated, ignoring everything Philip had just said.
'You cannot see him.'
'I *have* to see him' Aubrey snapped. 'I don't care what you think. I love Haru...and I want to spend the rest of my life with him. You can't control other people like pawns. You can't make him marry that girl if he doesn't want to...'
Philip sighed in resignation, staring back at Aubrey with displeasure.
'Come in' Philip spoke sombrely. 'I need to speak with you.'
Aubrey was surprised by this, blinking several times.
He hesitated for only a moment, feeling a little suspicious, before stepping forwards.
Philip held the door open for him as Aubrey entered the manor.
Philip closed the door, turning to face him.
'Come with me' he grumbled, moving away.
Aubrey followed him.

They moved through the manor and to a room only a short distance away from the front door, it was a small office.
Philip closed the door behind Aubrey as he entered after him, slowly turning to face him.
‘Where is Haru?’ Aubrey demanded.
‘You should not have come here’ Philip spoke.
‘I want to see Haru’ Aubrey spoke levelly.
‘Haru is dead.’

Chapter Twenty-Two

Aubrey felt as if he had been punched in the chest.
He stared in shock, unable to speak for the longest time, as a dark cloud descended over him.

His vision began to fog, and he stumbled back, grabbing the edge of a cabinet to support himself.
He clapped his hand to his mouth then, feeling suddenly sick. He let out a whimper, eyes beginning to shimmer.
Philip watched him without emotion.
Aubrey regained some control, taking his hand away from his mouth.
‘How…?’ Aubrey uttered, tears running down his cheeks as he cried silently.
‘His fever ran high’ Philip spoke calmly. ‘His body was weak……...he died late last night.’
Aubrey let out a sob, biting onto his fist.
His legs tremble, and he fell to his knees, and he began to cry into his hands.
‘How could this happen?’ Aubrey wailed. ‘How….?’
‘His mother passed onto him the same sickness she suffered herself’ Philip continued. ‘He has been sick for a long time.’
‘No this can’t happen’ Aubrey cried hysterically, shaking his head. ‘This can’t!’
‘I’m sorry’ Philip spoke. ‘He is dead.’
Aubrey raised his head, eyes wide and reddening.
Philip approached him.
‘I think you should leave this place’ Philip said to him. ‘I’ll arrange a ship to take you back home.’
‘What?’
‘You had to take a ferry to get here from home didn’t you’ Philip said to him. ‘You’ve been expelled. Because you ran away, because of your record. You’ve caused trouble for too long.’

Aubrey left the manor, accompanied by a man who travelled with him to the docks so that he could be sent back home, to make sure he got on the ferry, and didn't try to return to school. Philip wanted him gone.
Philip had told him that his parents had been informed of what had happened, though Aubrey did not know to what extend they knew of the details, he didn't care. Aubrey's parents knew he had been expelled, and that he was coming home to them.
'The ferry will be here soon' the man who accompanied Aubrey told him. 'Philip wants you gone as soon as possible. Back home and away.'
They were at the docks now, after a short drive. Aubrey had been brought here, and now he waited. But he barely heard the words the man spoke to him, glancing towards the stranger with eyes out of focus, his mind still a haze.
Nothing seemed real anymore, and he experienced the same sense of unreality he had felt when Amelia had died.
'It will be just a few more minutes' the man said to him. 'Your things will be brought to you later, anything you own that you've left back at school.'
Aubrey turned away from him, looking back out towards the sea.
For a long time, he had hated his own home, and never wanted to return. But despite this, he still caused trouble at school and for a long time risked getting expelled. He didn't know why he did this, he just did it anyway. It was just how he was. He had never felt at peace anywhere in his life, not unless he was with his friends, and not since he had admitted his feelings for Haru.
He did not remember feeling happier in life than when he was with Haru. He had been in love before with previous girlfriends, but with Haru it felt different, he couldn't explain it.
Aubrey buried his face in his hands, shoulders trembling as he sobbed silently, still not believing this had happened, still not believing any of this was real.
'Haru.....oh god no..... why.....?'

Sasha had reached the manor at last, it had been difficult, it was a long long way to travel on foot from the school. She moved quickly, but despite this, it had taken many many hours.
When she reached the place, she was blown away.
'Oh no way' she gasped as she stared into the grounds, and the manor that sat in the middle. 'Haru..... is *this* your home?'

Her stomach growled and ached painfully inside her then. The excursion had made her ravenously hungry, but she ignored this as she leaned towards the great gates, hand curling around the bars as she gazed up at the manor.
‘This place is a literal mansion’ she breathed, speaking to herself. ‘Haru....you told me your family had a lot of money.... but I had no idea...’
But something stopped her from entering the grounds. She didn’t know what, but something felt wrong, some sense she couldn’t explain.
Instead of trying to enter the ground as Aubrey had done hours before her, she moved off to the side, moving to sit in the small patch of trees to rest, and to think.
Back at the school a great distance away, Ben sat. He was in his room now, having controlled himself, his breathing regular again, the pump he used lay on the table beside his bed in his dormitory. And as he leant forwards on his elbows, he glanced to the side out of the window, wondering.....wondering.... what was happening beyond the grounds of the school?
‘I hope everyone comes back safely’ he worried.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Philip stood in his office alone, staring down at some papers and sifting quietly through them. The manor was silent, and there was a hush over the place now.
Philip raised his head, turning to glance through the window. It was a sunny day, the air was warm and comfortable, and in the blue sky above, the clouds drifted lazily by.
Philip wondered then, if Aubrey had made it to the docks, and he wondered if the ferry had left yet. The docks were not far from the manor, just a short drive.
‘I hope he’s gone now’ Philip mumbled to himself. ‘I hope I never have to see him again.’
The office door opened then, and Philip looked around.
Haru entered the office, glaring at him.
‘One of the housekeepers said they saw Aubrey here’ Haru spoke, his voice weak, cheeks still flushed.
His fever was still high.
‘You shouldn’t be out of bed’ Philip said to him. ‘You should be resting, you’re still sick.’
‘What happened to Aubrey?’ Haru demanded. ‘Where is he?!’
‘He left’ Philip said. ‘He doesn’t care that you’re sick.’
‘I don’t believe you’ Haru snarled hatefully. ‘You...you’re lying.... why would he come this way just to leave? He came to see me...where is he? I want to see him.’
‘He’s gone, I told you’ his father said patiently, pursing his lips as he put the papers he held down, turning to face Haru fully now. ‘He doesn’t care about you.’
‘I don’t believe you’ Haru said again. ‘He loves me....and I love him.’

‘You are to have nothing to with him’ Philip spoke firmly to him, rising from his seat, his manner threatening. ‘You are to marry Jasmine.’
‘I do not love her!’ Haru cried, slamming his hands down upon the desk. ‘And she doesn’t love me. I love Aubrey! And I don’t care what you think about anything anymore. My life is my own! Not yours! I will not marry Jasmine. I do not love her! I love Aubrey. I love Aubrey.’
‘Aubrey is gone.’
‘What have you done?’ Haru demanded.
‘Aubrey has left.’
‘Left?’
‘He’s going home.’
‘Home?’ Haru faltered. He gasped then. ‘You’ve sent him away?’
‘I don’t want to see him ever again.’
Haru drew a deep breath, balling his fists and gritting his teeth. He teetered on the spot for a moment, grasping the desk for support as shock, fear, uncertainty and many different emotions washed over him. But was would not fall, he was determined to stay standing. He didn’t want to succumb to his weakness. Aubrey was the only thing that mattered in the world.
‘You won’t see either of us ever again.’
‘Haru!’
Haru turned tailed and ran out of the room, ignoring his father’s cries as he called after him, but Haru didn’t care. He thought of only one thing as he ran down the stairs of the manor, tearing through the entrance hall.
‘Aubrey….’ Haru gasped. ‘Aubrey please….’
He left the home, running down the driveway and through the gates, skidding suddenly to a halt as he suddenly recognised a figure he did not expect to see.
‘S-Sasha!’
‘Haru!’
She rushed up to him, embracing him tightly.
‘Oh thank god you’re alright’ she sobbed, holding him tightly. ‘Haru we were so worried for you…
‘Sasha...’
‘Is it true?’ Sasha sobbed, holding him by the shoulders now. ‘Are you….in love with Aubrey....are you together already? I didn’t know.... Aubrey told us something but.... Ben and I had no idea....’
Haru blushed slightly then, letting out a sigh.
‘It’s true’ he mumbled. ‘I love Aubrey, we are together now like a couple.’ He tensed suddenly then. ‘Where is he? I have to know!’
‘I don’t know’ Sasha breathed. ‘I don’t know.... oh Haru you’re burning up’ she said, caressing his face and touching his forehead. ‘You’re still sick.’
‘I have to find Aubrey’ Haru said to her, taking her hands from his face and holding them both in his own firmly. ‘Where is he?’ he asked her again, desperate.
‘I don’t know’ Sasha shook her head. ‘I’m sorry.’
Haru stared at her hard then, still holding her hands.

‘My father told him I was dead’ Haru said, his voice breaking.
‘What?’ Sasha gasped.
‘Aubrey thinks I’m dead.....wait’ Haru said, bowing his head as his mind worked furiously. ‘Aubrey would surely have been expelled for running away from school’ he murmured. ‘My father.... would want him away from me..... oh god....’
‘What?’ Sasha gasped again, terrified now.
‘He’s sending Aubrey home!’
‘Oh jeez’ Sasha groaned.
‘We have to find him before he leaves’ Haru said, grabbing her by the wrist and pulling her along. ‘Aubrey’s home is far away, he would have taken a ferry to get here. I know where he is. My father would have sent him to the docks. Come on, we have to go!’
‘How are we going to get there?!’ Sasha cried.
‘It’s not far’ Haru said, pulling her by the wrist as they ran away from the manor. ‘We can make it on foot! Come on! I can’t lose him!’

They ran away from the manor, Haru holding Sasha by the wrist tightly as they went.
They ran through the town together, Haru quickly becoming tired, gasping and panting, and Sasha watched him with concern as he visibly began to tire. But Haru did not slow.
‘I can’t lose him’ he gasped, his breath in wheezes. ‘I can’t lose him!’
Sasha felt a twinge of nervousness as they continued to run, a growing sense of trepidation.
‘Haru...’ Sasha breathed, glancing over at him, seeing his red cheeks flushed, she was worried for him.
They reached the docks at the edge of the town, slowing to a stop at the very end of the harbour.
‘Hey!’ Sasha barked at one of the men standing nearby. ‘When is the next ferry?’
‘It’s just gone’ the man replied pointing towards the sea. ‘There won’t be another one until tomorrow.’
Sasha whipped her head around, looking back towards the water towards the ferry that had just left the dock not two minutes before, and was heading slowly out to sea. Haru’s attention was fixated on it, eyes wide in shock and horror and disbelief.
Haru let out a moan, grasping his head with both hands and sobbing.
‘Oh god no….no no no…’
He fell to his knees, body hunched and head in his hands as he began to cry.
Haru raised his head towards the ferry, rising quickly to his feet again.
He jumped suddenly into the water without warning, and Sasha screamed, rushing forwards.
‘Haru!’
Haru broke the surface of the water, gasping for air. He ignored Sasha’s cries, swimming towards the ferry.
Sasha moved forward sharply, intending to jump in after him, but she was grabbed by the man from behind, a stranger.
‘No’ he gasped as she began to struggle. ‘Don’t jump in, the currents are dangerous!’
Sasha moaned in desperation as she struggled against the man, unable to break from his grasp.
‘*No Haru stop! Please come back!*’ she screamed.

But Haru did not stop. He continued to swim as fast as he could out to sea, out towards the ferry, though he would never catch it.

Upon the ferry, Aubrey leant forwards against the edge of the deck, eyes out of focus, his chin resting on his palm.
He blinked slowly, heart beating heavily in his chest.
He heard a voice then in the distance. A voice calling his name.
Aubrey glanced down towards the water, heart stopping in his chest at what he saw.
'……Haru…..?'
He grasped the edge of the ferry, staring in shock and disbelief down at the water.
The currents were strong, and Haru was beginning to struggle, slipping beneath the water, fighting to stay above the surface as his heavy clothes weighed him down.
Aubrey's heart pounded in his chest, the blood rushed in his ears. He stepped back from the edge, taking his shirt and trousers off in panic and climbing up onto the barrier. People behind him called out in alarm as he dived off the ferry and into to the water, surfacing seconds later, swimming back towards the shore.
'Haru!' he gasped. 'Haru!'
Haru fought for air, clawing through the water, falling beneath the surface once again, he began to sink.
Aubrey dived, swimming as fast as he could, his movements controlled as he closed the gap between them.
He grasped Haru around the wrist then, pulling him upwards.
They broke the surface together, Aubrey holding Haru in both his arms.
He began to shake him, hand beneath his chin and lifting his head up.
'Haru? Haru please!'
Haru was unconscious, his dead weight heavy in Aubrey's arms.
'Oh god no' Aubrey sobbed, whiping his head around back towards the shore.
He clawed through the water, carrying Haru with him, holding him with one arm, struggling to hold Haru's head above the water.
He swam closer towards the shore, at long last reaching the shallows, his feet touching the sea bed he was able to stand, holding Haru in both his arms now he dragged him up the beach.
Aubrey knelt then, laying Haru's unconscious limp body upon the sands, leaning over him and beginning to tremble violently.
'Haru! Haru please wake up! No no no no…'
He took Haru's face in his hands, slapping his cheek hard repeatedly.
'Oh god no…' Aubrey sobbed.
He leant over Haru, his ear hovering over his mouth to hear for his breath, staring at Haru's chest as people on the beach around them began to gather. He wasn't breathing.
He pressed his hand firmly upon Haru's throat, feeling there no pulse.
Aubrey let out a panicked sob. He pinched Haru's nose, tilting Haru's chin up and placing his mouth over Haru's and breathing into him.

Aubrey leant back knitting his hands together, pressing them to Haru's chest and pumping.
Sasha reached them then, running across the beach and slowing to a stop. Hand going to her mouth and face contorting in grief and horror at what she saw.
'Haru!' she sobbed.
A life guard reached them then, falling to his knees opposite Aubrey and ordering him to get back.
Aubrey fell back, leaning back again his palm, hand to his mouth as he began to sob, body trembling as the lifeguard began to perform CPR on Haru.
'Oh please Haru' Aubrey begged, shaking his head and leaning forwards again. 'Oh god Haru please don't die. *Please don't die!*'
Aubrey bowed his head then, beginning to pray.
'Oh please' Aubrey moaned, tears streaming down his cheeks. 'Please please please…'
Haru jerked suddenly then, coughing and retching. The lifeguard leant back suddenly as Haru rolled onto his side facing Aubrey now, gasping for breath.
'Haru!'
Aubrey embraced him, arms wrapped around his body, nails digging into his skin.
'Oh thank god!' Aubrey sobbed hysterically, tears streaming down his cheeks. 'Thank god!'
'Aubrey…' Haru moaned, unable to move in Aubrey's firm hold.
'Marry me!' Aubrey breathed.
Haru stared at him in stunned disbelief.
'Wh…what?' Haru gasped.
'Marry me' Aubrey repeated, holding Haru's head in his hands. 'I love you with all my heart and soul…...and I want to spend the rest of my life with you……...Haru…I thought you had died… your father told me….' he gritted his teeth, tears running down his cheek. 'I thought I had lost you.'
'Aubrey…'
Haru's words were cut off suddenly as Aubrey kissed him. The people around them began to cheer and clap (hardly knowing what had just happened). Sasha began to laugh with joy now, hands pressed to her heart.
Aubrey leant back then, pressing his forehead against Haru's, caressing Haru's cheek, crying with relief. Haru laughed, lifting his arms and holding Aubrey around the back of the neck.
Aubrey lifted him up, holding Haru in both his arms now, close to his body.
'You're shaking' Aubrey said.
'I'm cold' Haru mumbled.
Aubrey laughed again with joy, holding Haru as tight as he could to him, feeling his cold wet shirt against his bare chest.
'I love you Haru…. I love you so much….'

Haru was taken to hospital shortly after, his fever had gotten worse again, and for several days, Haru was unstable.
But in time, Haru began to get better again, as his body began to grow stronger.

Haru was discharged from hospital weeks later, returning to the boarding school.
He did not see Aubrey for weeks after that, because Aubrey had been sent back home. But around Christmas, they were able to see each other again, if only for a short time. And a few days later, they met up again, at the start of the new year.

Haru waited alone in the small town square, glancing about him nervously.
It was dark, and as the clock struck midnight, the new year fireworks began.
Haru turned with wide eyes towards the sky. Before him, just over the lip of the hill and on lower ground was the crowd that had gathered in the park to watch the countdown. Haru had heard their voices counting down from ten, had heard the cheering as they hit zero.
He listened silently, looking towards the sounds of the people in the distance. He glanced up towards the sky then, watching as the first fireworks shot into the sky, the explosions of colours were beautiful.
'There you are' came a voice.
Haru turned, seeing Aubrey approaching him, walking slowly with his hands in his pockets.
His heart instantly began to soar in his chest.
'Aubrey….'
Aubrey stopped before him, reaching out to him and cupping Haru's face in his hands, as Haru held him back, hands resting on Aubrey's arms.
'Haru' Aubrey breathed. 'You've made me the happiest man in the world, and meeting you is the best thing that's ever happened to me.'
Haru's expression broke into a smile then, and he began to laugh.
'What all this about?' he asked, 'whats gotten into you all of a sudden?'
'Haru…'
Aubrey broke away from him then, stepping back slowly and dropping to knee, grimacing as he did. He still suffered the pain in his knees, permanent damage from the fall.
'I love you Haru' he said, 'and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.'
He took a small box out from the inside of his coat, opening it to reveal inside a ring.
'Will you marry me?'
Haru let out a slow gasp, clapping his hands over his mouth, eyes wide in shock and beginning to shimmer.
Tears began to roll down his cheeks as his breath caught in his throat.
He hunched his shoulders, closing his eyes tight now and struggling to control his emotions.
'Yes!' he gasped, 'yes!'
He fell to his knees, embracing Aubrey and sobbing into his shoulder.
'This is the happiest day of my life' Haru whispered through his tears.
Aubrey smiled as he held him back, stroking the back of Haru's head tenderly.
'Don't say that' Aubrey whispered to him. 'You have many more happy days to come.'
He placed his hands firmly against Haru's shoulders, pushing him back lightly so that he could look into his face.

He frowned in amusement at Haru, seeing the tears of joy spilling down his cheeks as he was awash with emotion.
Haru bowed his head then as Aubrey took him by the hand, gently slipping the ring onto his finger.
Haru looked up again, gazing into Aubrey's face, before leaning forwards into him, sobbing uncontrollably into his shoulder.
'Come on' Aubrey said after a time, rising to his feet with effort and helping Haru into a stand. 'Let's go and join the celebration, this will be the start of a wonderful new year.'

It was just one month later when the two were married.
The wedding was a secret affair, just as they wanted, taking place in the grounds of a quiet church a few miles away from the town, out in the countryside where it was peaceful.
Both dressed in pure white, Aubrey and Haru stood facing each other on the stone steps before the church, framed by an arch of pink and white flowers above them, the female priest standing beside them.
They exchanged rings, each putting one on the others finger.
Then Aubrey took both of Haru's hands in his.
'I can't promise to be a perfect man, but I can promise…' Aubrey's voice began to waver, '…that for the rest of my life…...I will work to make you as happy as I possibly can.'
Haru bit his lip then, tears running down his cheeks as he listened to Aubrey's words.
'I promise…' Haru spoke in reply, 'before god…. that I will love you with all my heart and soul….and I look forward to sharing this great life with you……thank you…... thank you for being my friend…... thank you for looking out for me….and… um…...'
Haru was unable to continue, that was when Aubrey stopped him, cupping his face and shushing him as he pressed a thumb to his lips, smiling down at him with tears of joy shimmering in his own eyes as they gazed at each other.
He lifted Haru in his arms then, holding him like a princess as Haru leant into his chest, laughing and crying with joy as their friends, Ben and Sasha watching at the bottom of the stone steps began to clap, Sasha throwing white petals up in the air from a basket she held in the crook of her arm.
'This is the happiest day of my life!' Haru laughed, tears continuing to roll down his cheeks.
'Don't say that' Aubrey smiled to him. 'You have many more happy days to come.'
Haru blinked up at him, expression breaking into a smile once more.
Aubrey held him closer, kissing him on the lips as Haru gently grasped onto the front of his suit, his other hand brushing his jaw.
Aubrey put Haru down then, taking him by the hand and walking down the short flight of steps with him.
Sasha approached them then with a sad smile, offering a single flower to them, a purple tulip.
Haru took it gently from her, walking away with Aubrey beside him, still holding his hand, Ben and Sasha trailing after them.
They came to one of the graves nearby, and Haru knelt before it, placing the single purple tulip upon the plinth before the headstone before straightening again, leaning into Aubrey as he wrapped his arms around him. Amelia's grave.

‘This is what she would have wanted’ Haru spoke in a distant voice, smiling down at the grave in sadness. ‘She told me to live happy…to tell you how I feel…to live a happy life with you’ he said turning to Aubrey.
Aubrey brushed Haru’s tears away tenderly.
‘She’s probably watching over us now’ Aubrey told him. ‘She would want us to be happy.’
Haru let out a sob, burying his face in Aubrey’s chest.
‘We have to live a good life’ Haru breathed, as Ben and Sasha waited quietly a step behind them. ‘We have to do this’ Haru said, ‘for each other….and for her.’
The edges of Aubrey’s eyes crinkled in joy.
He held Haru closer to him, resting his head against Haru’s.
He sighed and closed his eyes, as the four of them, stood silently before the grave.
‘At least you have a happy ending’ Sasha spoke then, these words were spoken with sadness, but there was a smile upon her face, of true happiness.
‘No’ Aubrey breathed, ‘this is only the beginning.’
Haru smiled, turning to face the others. ‘I believe Amelia is in a good place now, and I believe...that wherever she is…. she is happy....’
He looked to Aubrey then, eyes warm and gentle.
‘We never did finish that play’ Haru said to him.
‘We still can’ Aubrey replied, caressing his cheek tenderly. ‘We don’t graduate for a few more months.’
‘And after that?’ Haru asked.
Aubrey leaned into him, squeezing Haru a little tighter.
‘Our life together truly begins’ he said.
‘You mean the rest of us don’t graduate for a few more months’ Sasha voiced loudly then. ‘You’ve been expelled remember?’ she said to Aubrey. ‘Remember that time you got expelled and totally deserved it?’
Beside them Ben began to laugh, holding his hand to his mouth.
‘Oh yeah’ Aubrey chuckled awkwardly. ‘I kinda forgot for a moment.’

Epilogue

Three years later

‘Good work today Haru’ his supervisor told him.
‘Thanks’ Haru laughed a little flustered, putting the tray full of dirty plates onto the rack to be cleaned. ‘It’s pretty busy out there today hu?’
Outside the doors of the kitchen, the low murmur of the customers talking could be heard, the chink of knives and forks as the gentle conversations overlapping continued.
‘Even that table at the back is happy’ Haru noted, turning to look through the window in the door towards the large party in the corner of the restaurant.
‘That’s great’ his supervisor told him but it’s past 4 o’clock, time for you to go now.’
‘Oh right, I didn’t notice’ Haru fumbled glancing up. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow then.’
‘See you.’
Haru left the kitchen, smiling happily towards two of his fellow workers, a young man standing before the tills, and a young woman dishing up plates.
They both said goodbye to him as he walked by, waving at him.
Haru went to the changing room briefly to hang up his apron, before getting his bag from the locker and walking briskly out of the building.
He caught a late bus and sat by the window, staring out at the town as the bus made its route.
He got off at his stop and walked the rest of the short distance towards the block of apartments, heading to the one on the first floor.
Haru opened the door to the apartment to be greeted by the wonderful smell of cooking.
As he closed the door behind him, he saw Aubrey in the next room, leaning back to see him through the doorway.
‘Hey you’re back!’ Aubrey cried, wearing a sky-blue apron and holding pan and spatula in his hand. ‘You’re a bit late today.’
Haru smiled, putting his bag down on the table beside the door.
He had barely a chance to speak when two small figures appeared from around the corner, running to him.
‘Daddy!’
‘Yey Daddy’s home!’
Haru laughed out loud as the boys, aged three (Aiden) and five (Ken) ran to him, hugging his legs.
Haru knelt, coming to their level so he could hug them properly, holding each of his boys in his arms.
Aubrey approached him then, walking out of the kitchen with a smile upon his face as Haru glanced up at him, grinning happily.
‘Welcome home dear’ Aubrey spoke softly.
Haru frowned in amusement, letting go of the boys and rising to his feet. He stepped forwards towards Aubrey, giving him a brief kiss.
‘It’s good to be home’ Haru sighed, following Aubrey back to the kitchen, one of the boys taking his hand to hold as they went, the other running ahead.

‘How are your knees today?’ Haru asked him.
‘They’re a little worse today’ Aubrey admitted as Haru sat at the table. ‘Think I’m going to visit the doctors tomorrow, I might need more painkillers, maybe something a little stronger...’
Haru leant his elbow on the table, resting his chin in his palm as he watched Aubrey who stood with his back to him, continuing to cook.
‘I love you’ Haru spoke quietly.
Aubrey glanced around, pausing what he was doing and smiling back at Haru.
He turned the gas stove off, moving towards Haru and leaning over him then.
Haru tilted his head back as Aubrey kissed him deeply, passionately feeling his tongue.
‘Eeeeeewww!’ Ken protested loudly then. ‘Please stop doing that its gross!’
Aubrey straightened then, smiling down at the boy as Aiden played with his toy truck on the floor nearby.
He approached Ken, lifting him in his arms and kissing his cheek. ‘It’s not gross’ he said.
‘Yes it is’ Ken replied sulkily, squirming away as Aubrey began to tickle him.
‘Just wait till you grow up and fall in love and have kids of your own’ Aubrey said.
‘He’s a bit young for that’ Haru told him sternly, leaning forwards on the table.
‘I’m not going to fall in love’ Ken said loudly, wiggling in Aubrey’s arm.
‘And I thought I would fall in love with a nice woman’ Aubrey said flatly. ‘You never know where life will take you, now sit at the table, dinners ready.’
‘Yeah!’ Ken squealed in delight as Aubrey put him down.
‘Come on Aiden’ Aubrey said to him, and the child rose, stomping over towards the table, instead of heading to his own seat he went to Haru, crawling onto his lap.
‘You shouldn’t encourage that behaviour’ Aubrey scolded as he began to serve food, seeing Aiden sitting upon Haru’s lap.
‘Oh, he’s alright’ Haru said dismissively, hugging Aiden.
‘I don’t like you spoiling him’ Aubrey said seriously. ‘He’s starting to get badly behaved.’
‘Can we not talk about this now?’ Haru sighed wearily.
Aubrey sat at the table opposite Haru, Ken sitting beside them.
‘Dad?’ Ken voiced.
‘Yes?’ Aubrey and Haru spoke in unison.
The paused then, glancing at each other with a smile.
‘We’re going to have to sort this out soon’ Aubrey said in amusement.
‘You can be Dad number two’ Haru said to Aubrey.
‘Why am I number two?’ Aubrey asked sulkily.
‘Because I’m better than you’ Haru teased, and Aiden before him began to play with his food.
‘Very funny’ Aubrey frowned flatly.
‘*Dad?*!’ Ken whinned.
‘Who are you talking to?’ Aubrey asked him with slight annoyance in his tone.
‘Anyone.’
‘What do you want?’ Aubrey asked him.
‘Um…’ Ken bowed his head, staring at his lap. ‘I’m scared of going to school tomorrow’ he spoke moodily in a mumbled voice. ‘It’s all so new and scary.’
‘Oh honey’ Aubrey said to him. ‘There’s no need to be scared.’

‘But I don’t know anyone’ Ken whined.
‘Maybe Haru’s the best to talk to about this. You two can talk after dinner. He’s better at this sort of thing. He used to be really shy. He used to cry all the time in school.’
Haru gasped in horror at that.
‘Aubrey! D-don’t tell him that!’
‘It’s true isn’t it?’ Aubrey replied innocently.
‘Is that true Dad?’ Ken asked Haru, turning to speak to him.
‘Mmm’ Haru groaned, looking down at Aiden who ignored their discussion, and continued instead to make a mess on the table and flick food everywhere. ‘Yeah’ Haru admitted reluctantly. ‘I was always uncomfortable around people. But when I met Aubrey’ he said raising his head towards him, ‘he helped me.’
Aubrey and Haru exchanged a glanced, their sights lingering on each other for a short time before looking away.
‘Whatever trouble you’re having’ Aubrey said to Ken, ‘you and Haru can talk after dinner. For now, let’s enjoy our meal.’
‘Aiden stop doing that’ Haru told him. ‘Don’t play with your food, just eat it, ok?’
‘Can you feed me Daddy?’ Aiden said, opening and closing his mouth like a fish out of water.
Haru began to spoon feed him.
‘Haru!’ Aubrey barked. ‘What have I told you?’
‘Oh, come on’ Haru whined, hugging Aiden to him and hunching his shoulders. ‘He’s not doing anything.’
‘I’ve told you a million times to stop pandering to him.’
‘I wasn’t doing anything!’ Haru cried dramatically and Aubrey began to argue with him, Ken ignoring both of them and concentrating on his meal.

Within the room upon the shelf beside the violin case, was a very wide-brimmed yellow hat, with a fabulously bright red feather pinned in the side, an ostrich feather. And upon the windowsill in the kitchen, sat a vase that was filled with purple tulips. They bobbed slowly in the light breeze that came from outside, the bright and beautiful flower petals shining in the sunlight.